PRIZE WINNING HISTORY IN BLENHEIM ESSAY CONTEST

BY NORMAN PEAT

It is my purpose to unfold to you the story of the beginning and development of Blenheim township from the time the first people of the Anglo-Saxon race came in and hewed down its forests, built their homes, tilled the virgin soil and wrested from it the harvests which have never ceased to be bountiful. Well might we sign of the faith of our fathers, for it required not only indomitable courage but much faith to meet the hardships with which the pioneer life was filled. It is only right that we should have a just admiration and a humble pride for the lives and achievements of these settlers. As they have led the way, may we in this, our generation, seek to leave worthy footprints for those who come after us.

Blenheim is one of the two largest townships of the county and contains 67,200 acres. It extends approximately ten miles from east to west and twelve miles from north to south and forms part of the County of Oxford. The township was originally well timbered with hardwoods such as maple, beech, oak, hickory, and elm. There was also a considerable quantity of basswood, pine, cedar, hemlock and tamarack. The principal streams are Horner's creek and Smith's creek. Both follow zigzag courses through lots and roadways. Smith's Creek extending as a hypotenuse practically from the northwest corner to the southeast corner of the township across sixty-seven lots, and Horner's creek running through the south-west corner crosses twenty-one lots. Many bridges are therefore necessary, and the question of bridge building has always been prominent in the municipal affairs of Blenheim.

"SPIES" FROM NEW JERSEY

The foundling of Blenheim dates back to the year 1792 when Colonel John Graves Simcoe was Lieutenant-Governor of Upper Canada. During the revolutionary war a Mr. Thomas Watson of the State of New Jersey had rendered Simcoe valuable personal services when the latter had been taken prisoner. When Simcoe became Governor he wrote to Mr. Watson urging him to come to Canada and bring his friends and relatives. As an inducement he offered him a whole township. Accordingly in 1792 Mr. Watson sent his two nephews, Thomas Watson and Thomas Horner to spy out the promised land and start the new settlement. They journeyed northwest from New Jersey to the Indian Reserve, which at that time included the townships of Dumfries and Brantford, and finding the adjacent territory to these well watered and fertile, chose it for their settlement.

The manner in which Blenheim acquired its name is somewhat vague. There is a tradition that the township is named after Blenheim House, which is situated near

Oxford in England. This beautiful palace was bestowed on John Churchill Duke of Marlborough in honor of his victory over the French at the battle of Blenheim in 1704. Blenheim may also be a corruption of the word "Blindheim", meaning "dull home". According to Voltaire the Germans call it Plentheim and yet another spelling of the word is "Plintheim".

By proclamation of Governor Simcoe, dated July 16th, 1792, Blenheim was first included in the west riding of the County of York and was described as lying to the northwest of Dundas street opposite Burford. In 1798 the township of Blenheim became part of the county of Oxford as then formed. Prior to this there had been three surveys made of the township. The first was by Jones in 1793 who laid out the first three concessions and divided the land between into lots of two hundred acres each. This survey embraced the first two concessions of Blenheim and the first concession of Burford. Its western boundary was Horner's creek and the eastern boundary was lot four in the first concession at the place where the road turns to the left and leads into Mudge Hollow (now Canning). The township was further surveyed by Riddell in 1795 and by Stegman in 1798.

FIRST HORNER MILL

By 1795 Mr. Horner had located a site for his mills on the north of lot 15, concession one, directly in front of the residence of the late William Hersee. He cleared a small field on the western bank of the creek, built a house, set out an orchard and constructed a dam. Horner bought his mill machinery at Albany and transported it by lakes and rivers to Burlington Bay (Hamilton, Ont.). From there it was drawn by oxen on roughly hewn sledges to Blenheim. The saw mill was completed that year but before it was ready to operate, the dam broke and the mill burned. It was rebuilt, and the first lumber sawed in 1797 was used in the construction of the Horner homestead, which later became the first registry office of the county of Oxford. Work was then commenced n a grist mill and it was completed in 1802. Bad luck seemed to dog the heels of Horner, for in 1809 the grist mill was burned and never rebuilt. On May 17th, 1802, lots number ten and thirteen, concession one, Governor's Road, were granted to Thomas Watson, who named his settlement Princeton after his native city in New Jersey.

By this time a road had been opened from Whiteman's creek across the plains to where Beamsville now stands and from there to the Governor's road settlement as far as Lervis Charle's tavern. Horner continued the road through the forest to his mill passing across the farm owned by Mr. Daniel. This road was in use until 1840. It later became a community blackberry patch. A road was then commenced in a northeast direction to the German settlement in Waterloo county. This trail lead through unbroken wilderness to the northeast corner of the township. It went north through William Hersee's farm and continued on to the Laidlaw estate, passing where Wolverton station now is. The trail

continued east of the Kilgour farm to the tenth concession, on across the McEwen farm to the eleventh concession and thence to Perry's Corners. From there it passed through the old hall farm to the German settlement.

LOST LAND GRANT

In the meantime Governor Simcoe had been recalled. Horner and Watson, having fully complied with the agreement between their uncle and the Governor, were entitled to a free grant of the township of Blenheim. Simcoe's successor refused to carry out this agreement or in any way acknowledge their just claims. The settlers were cheated out of their land after years of hard work. Horner's feelings were embittered against the ruling faction. He entered into political action against them and along with Perry, McKenzie and others he fought the old Family Compact (as the ruling party was called) until the time of his death. Horner may well be called the pioneer founder of Blenheim. Born at Bordentown, New Jersey, on March 16th, 1767. His life presents a brilliant example of undying resolve and fiery determination. He was married in 1801 by James Ingersoll, J.P. In 1820 he was elected the first M.P. of the county of Oxford and also became Blenheim's first magistrate. A magistrate had the power to marry any person residing over 18 miles from a Church of England minister. The first couple he married were the father and mother of Mrs. John Carroll in 1801. He served in the war of 1812-14 and his feats on several occasions were of more than ordinary bravery. In 1822 a re-organization of the provincial militia was carried out and Horner, then captain of the Blenheim company, was appointed to command the regiment with the full rank of colonel. This event marked the first time in history of Upper Canada militia that an ordinary officer without military training had received so high a commission. Horner died of cholera at his home one mile east of Princeton on August 4, 1834. His passing marked the demise of the one of the greatest that Canada has ever known. Thomas Watson keenly disappointed over not getting his land, returned to his native New Jersey.

GALBRAITH AND MARTIN

The next oldest settlers were John Galbraith and Samuel Martin. Mr. Galbraith, the son of a British manufacturer had formerly come to America to establish his father's business in Vermont. He was unsatisfied and later set out for Upper Canada arriving in the spring of 1796. He traded his pony and saddle for lot 11 on the first concession of Blenheim which is still known as "Galbraith Place". Margaret Galbraith, his daughter born in 1801 was the first white child born in the township, and in 1812 the first apples grown in the county were produced from his orchard. At the time of his death in 1840 his farm was one of the most up-to-date in the township. The first settlers in the northern part of the township were the Scott family who crossed Smith Creek in 1834.

Educational advantages always occupied the attention of the first settlers, although their efforts to secure them were necessarily feeble. Every settlement erected its school house, a primitive structure usually built of logs and roofed with split clapboards. According to W.H. Langdon, who was for many years a teacher and local superintendent of education, the first school was erected on lot 10, first concession, about the year 1808. In the whole county of Oxford at that time there were only between 30 and 40 families which constituted the entire population. Oxford was then as now an interior county and in order to reach it from the east one had to follow a blazed trail from Ancaster, about 35 miles distant. On the west it was practically unbroken bush to the French settlement on the Detroit river. The nearest mill was Ancaster. In such surroundings the pioneers set manfully to work to build and establish school houses. There were few if any teachers and hence it was frequently necessary to secure the services of some pioneer who was better educated than his neighbors. He was engaged for only part of the year, the time and labor of both himself and his pupils being too precious in helping to clear the forest to allow them to keep the school open during the summer months.

SCHOOL TOURNAMENT

Before the middle of the nineteenth century great progress had been made in educational matters. The township had been divided into sections, schools erected and qualified teachers secured. There was always keen rivalry between the schools and the teachers and each teacher sought to show the highest results at the quarterly examinations, which were set by the local superintendent and trustees. The last meeting of this kind took place in Drumbo on Wednesday, April 25th, 1868 and between two and three hundred people representing fifteen of the eighteen schools took part. Springhill, Plattsville, Drumbo and Richwood mustered the strongest while there were two or three pupils from each of the other sections. This unique educational tournament appears to have been a complete success. Two of the teachers of the township, Mr. McLean of Richwood and M.F. Ainslie of Drumbo, both of whom gave long and efficient service. Others were George Perry of Perry's Corners, James Winterburn of Washington, A.S. Cruickshank of Princeton, John Clinton of Springhill; William Henderson of Chesterfield and Levi Masters of Plattsville.

Divine worship was never neglected in Blenheim. Religious services were first held by outside clergymen sent in by their respective denominations. During the summer months camp meetings were held and baptisms by immersion in Smith's Creek and other streams always attracted larger crowds. The religious denominations were chiefly Protestants, such as Methodists, Baptists, Anglicans, United Brethren and Lutheran. The Roman Catholics later started at Princeton.

The first Presbyterian church in Blenheim was built in 1831 when Rev. G. Murray came to Princeton. He gate the site for it on the southwest corner of his farm and contributed liberally to its erection. His wife, "Mother G", as she was called, was at all times first and foremost in all benevolent undertakings. In the north of Blenheim at Chesterfield the Presbyterians were again among the first to establish a church. The first services were held in a log building on the farm of John Knox. In 1856 the settlers of Blandford and Blenheim co-operated to build a new brick church. The first minister was Rev. Mr. Rodgers, who was followed by Joseph Scott. In 1859 Rev. Mr. Robertson came. He was renowned for his knowledge of the classics, and he became tutor to several young men of the community. Of these the most outstanding was Mr. John Henderson who later became principal of St. Catharines collegiate institute.

The Methodists started a church in Richwood about the year 1863 . The Baptists were represented at Gobles but later built churches at Richwood, Drumbo, Plattsville and Wolverton. Rev. George Patton was the first Baptist Minister at Drumbo. In 1857 the Methodist church was built there with Rev. William Bee as minister. In 1859 the Wesleyan Methodist church was erected at Washington and it was dedicated on January 1, 1860. Rev. Samuel Fear and Rev. David Chalmers were the first pastors and they also preached at Plattsville. Plattsville Methodist church was erected in 1853 and the Lutheran in 1860.

In the early days the pioneers were without a physician. Their health was later cared for by outside physicians who came from Paris, Ayr, Burford and Woodstock. Of the early resident physicians, Dr. James B. Rounds of Drumbo and Dr. Daniel Clark of Princeton were the most prominent. The latter afterwards became the able and efficient superintendent of the Toronto Insane Asylum. Plattsville's first physician was Dr. Morrison, who was followed by Dr. Phillips.

The first councilors of Blenheim were, Nicholas Pickle and William Grinton. These men represented the township at the first district council held in the courthouse in Woodstock on Tuesday, February 8th, 1842. The council was to be held on the second Tuesday of February, May, August and November and no meeting was to last longer than six days. Each township elected one councillor for a term of three years, while townships having more than three hundred freeholders elected two. The last district council was in 1849 and in 1850 the first township council was elected with William Dixon, reeve and J.N. Williamson, J. Kilburn, J. Motherall and J. Kennedy acting as Councillors. Joshua Cainett was the first tax collector and G.H. Laycock the first township clerk. Mr. Laycock's successor as clerk was M.F. Ainslie, who filled the position with satisfaction until 1909, when he as succeeded by the present efficient clerk, Hugh Allan. Among the early assessors were George F. Hill, Benjamin Horner and Jeremiah Cowan.

In the year 1852 the first census was taken with Jeremiah Cowan acting as enumerator. Blenheim by this time was well settled. Hon. George Brown during an election tour described Oxford as the "Garden of Canada" and as the census showed Blenheim to be leading the county in the production of wheat, oats, rye and potatoes, it might in turn be called the "Garden of Oxford". The average yield of wheat per acre was twenty-one and three-quarter bushels. That this wheat was of the highest quality was ably demonstrated by the fact that at the world's fair in Paris, France, Samuel Platt, the Plattsville miller, won first prize on flour. Blenheim Agricultural Society was first organized in 1854. The officers were: President, Fergus Anderson; vice-president, Francis Burgess; secretary-treasurer, Francis Williamson. The fair was always held at Drumbo.

WHEN THE RAILWAY CAME

The first trains in Blenheim ran on the Great Western Railway, passing through Canning and Princeton in 1852. The Buffalo and Lake Huron was opened in 1854 as far as Brantford and completed in 1858. It passed through Richwood, Drumbo and Plattsville station (Bright). In 1879 the Credit Valley Railway crossed Blenheim and established stations at Wolverton and Drumbo.

By 1860 Blenheim seems to have been well supplied with woolen mills, tanneries, blacksmith shops, saw and grist mills, wagon shops and general stores. For seventy-five cents a day you could stay at the best taverns and treat the crowd, no matter how many, for twenty-five cents. Washington had a first class cabinet and chair factory and Plattsville a foundry. Princeton, Drumbo and Plattsville were the three main villages. The manner in which these places acquired their names is extremely interesting. Plattsville was named in 1855 after its founder, Samuel Platts. He came to Canada in 1844 and after working as a millwright in New Dundee he settled in Blenheim and located a site for a mill on the east bank of the Nith. Mr. Platt was the first postmaster and also served as Justice of the Peace for many years. Drumbo, formerly Muma Corners, acquired its name in 1852. It is said that the meaning of the word is "A hump backed cow". There are many places in Ireland beginning with the letters, "Drum" and it is probably derived from that country. Bright was known for many years as Plattsville station. In 1863 or thereabouts, the late George Baird had the site of the present village surveyed and laid out in lots. Mr. Baird decided to give the place a more suitable name and being and admirer of the Hon. John Bright, the great British orator and statesman, he called it after him.

The other villages of the township acquired their names in a similar manner. In 1855 Gobles, also known as "Gobles Corners," was named after the late William L. Goble, son Rev. Jacob Goble, who came to Canada from New York State in 1823. He bought his father's property, started a general store and after the post office was started became postmaster. When the Great Western Railway was built the station bore the

name "Gobles" but was later changed to "Arnold", by which name it was known for some time. Wolverton, formerly Warsaw, was named in 1848 after one of its prominent pioneers, Enos Wolverton. The late John Hogarth (incidentally the grandfather of the writer) was the first while child born in the village in the year 1847. Some son of old Scotland is probably responsible for the name "Blink Bonnie". The designation appears to be the equivalent of the French for "Belle Vue". Washington, long known as "The Corners" was named in 1852 after George Washington. The residents of Plattsville claim that Washington was so called because one of the Plattsville's estimable ladies sent their washing there. The name Richwood in 1851 was supposedly derived from "Rich" and "Wood" in allusion to the spot selected for the site of the village. It is thought more probable that the place was named for a Mr. Rockwood, the pioneer storekeeper.

Thus I have tried to portray Blenheim as evolving from a wilderness, densely forested and inhabited only by Indians and a few white settlers to a tract of the finest agricultural land in the Province and settled by the most worthy and stalwart of Canadian manhood. A fitting line from Longfellow well describes it in those early days. "This is the forest primeval, the murmuring pines and the hemlock." Blenheim is a township of which Ontario - yes Canada - may well be proud.