

Historical Society of St. Catharines

NEWSLETTER

APRIL 1995

P.O. Box 24123, 80 King St., St. Catharines, Ontario L2R 7P7

(905/682-6053)

1995 NIAGARA HERITAGE SHOWCASE:

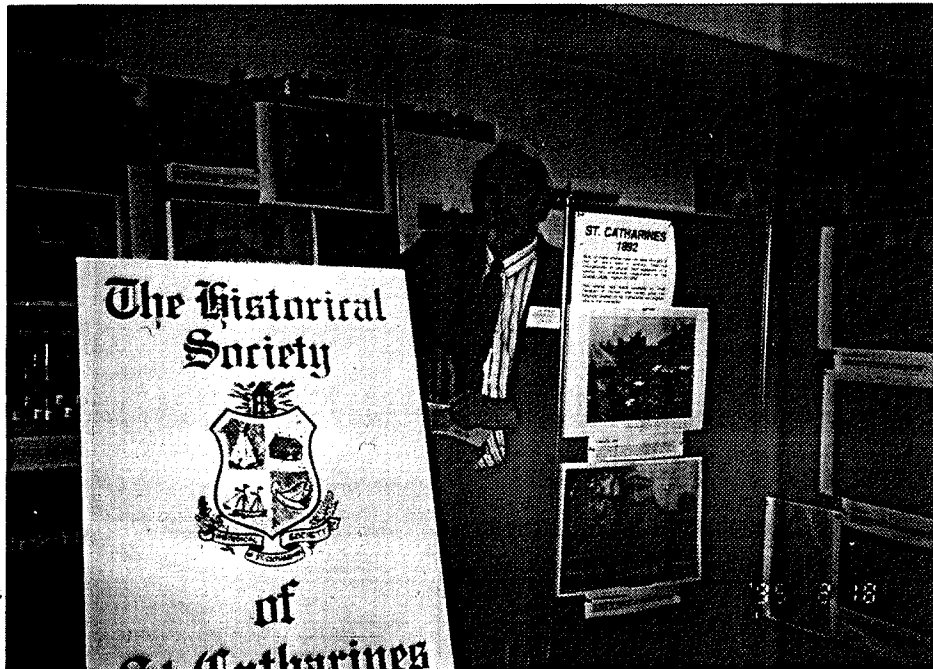


Photo courtesy of Phyllis Hill, Welland

The Historical Society's President looks out from behind the Society's display at the 1995 Niagara Heritage Showcase, held at the Pelham Library in Fonthill and sponsored by the Niagara Regional Historical Council. Our display featured panels decorated with laser photocopies of photos from a special St. Catharines supplement to the Toronto Globe published in 1892. (An original copy of that paper was recently obtained from Fred Campbell of the Thorold and Beaverdams Historical Society.)

THE ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING AND THE SOCIETY'S NEW EXECUTIVE:

It's that time of year again! Time for the Historical Society's Annual General Meeting, and time to choose the Society's executive for the coming year. This year the AGM will take place on Thursday, April 6, 1995, at 7:30 p.m. in the Mills Room of the St. Catharines Public Library, 54 Church Street. **The featured speaker will be St. Catharines-born mystery writer Howard Engel, who will talk about his memories of growing up in St. Catharines.**

The Nominating Committee (consisting of Past President John Burtniak, and former Presidents Al Holden and Sheila Wilson) has met and chosen the following slate of candidates for the Society's 1995-96 executive:

President:	Dennis Gannon;
Vice-President:	Wes Turner;
Secretary:	Bill Stevens;
Treasurer:	Avril Brass;
Councillors:	Cliff Baker, Joyce DeForest, Paul Hutchinson, Fran Michalko, and Jim Purdie;
Past President:	John Burtniak

This slate will be offered to the membership-at-large for their approval at the April 6th Annual General Meeting. **Note: nominations from the floor are in order. Such nominations may be made by members in good standing of the Society, provided that they are acceptable to the nominee and are supported by two other voting members of the Society.**

DORIS BATES:

Doris Bates has retired from the Executive after many years of service. Doris joined the Society in the 1960s, when the Society's meetings were held in glorious Rodman Hall. Over the years she has served at different times in two very important Society offices: that of Secretary and Treasurer. She has fulfilled these heavy responsibilities with efficiency and good cheer.

Doris has always been available to help out with any and all other tasks, large and small, not the least important of which has been arranging for the refreshments for our meetings. As well, Doris has been and continues to be involved with other local groups and has been able to bring the benefit of that liaison to our Society meetings.

We extend our best wishes to Doris in her retirement. We know that she will always be available for the Society.

***John Burtniak,
Past President***

ANNUAL REPORT:

Where does the Historical Society stand right now? Consider the following statistics: the membership is at 105 (up three from last year at this time, despite a 60 percent increase in the membership fee); and our bank balance stands at about \$3,400, about \$700 larger than last year at this time. (Two years ago the comparable figures were 38 paid-up members and \$1,050 in the bank.) The average attendance at our monthly meetings this year was about 60, up from 46 last year.

HERITAGE IN CYBERSPACE:

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Niagara Free-Net Logo

One of the newest and most exciting tools for people interested in keeping up with Heritage activities here in Niagara is the Niagara Peninsula Free-Net.

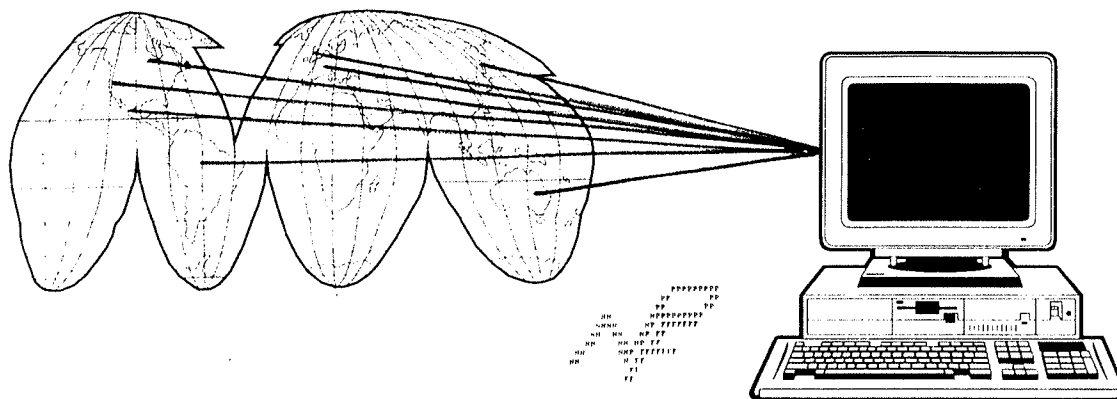
The Free-Net is a service available to persons who have personal computers outfitted with modems -- devices that allow computer users to communicate with other computers via telephone hookups. The Niagara Free-Net provides owners of computers with access to what might be thought of as a sort of super

computer operated by the Niagara Peninsula Industry Education Council (NPIEC) -- an avenue for the user to connect with information sources around Niagara and literally throughout the world via the fabled Internet.

This "super computer" arranges its services in menus. The menu likely to be of most interest to people with an interest in history and Heritage in general is the "History and Arts" menu. When you choose to explore the "History" subsection of that menu you are offered seven choices: a discussion group on Niagara history, a list of heritage events, a list of museums, a list of recent heritage publications relating to Niagara, a list of historical societies, a list of history-related tours, and a section devoted to genealogical research.

As of the afternoon of Wednesday, March 29, the "History" menu offered information about 30 coming events, some 25 museums, 18 publications, 38 historical societies, three tours, and its genealogical section included 44 items providing genealogical data from across Canada and around the world. The Niagara history discussion group is not yet functioning but will provide a space for asking questions and getting answers about Niagara history and discussing pressing historical/Heritage issues. You say you're researching the old Grand Opera House in St. Catharines and want to hear reminiscences about it or find memorabilia associated with it? In addition to any other more traditional means you may have at your disposal (e.g., an ad in the Standard) you will soon be able to put questions about such subjects on the "History" discussion area of the Freenet and sit back and wait for the responses to flash in.

For persons who are more actively engaged in history -- perhaps as writers or teachers -- a particularly useful menu is the one called "Libraries." This Free-Net area opens the door to, among other things, the exploration of the catalogues of libraries all over the world. Just a few days ago a Free-Net user found that the "Libraries" menu offered instant access to the catalogues of 74 libraries in this country as well as 504 university libraries and 47 public libraries in the United States (not to mention the other libraries available in Great Britain, Europe, Australia, South America . . . everywhere)!



This all sounds wonderful, and it is, but there are **some** disappointments along the way. There are no disappointments about the offerings under the heading of "History and the Arts" -- the provision of such comprehensive, immediate, and **up-to-minute** information about Heritage happenings in Niagara simply has never been tried before.

What disappointments there are come with the library listings. For example, while it IS possible to connect up with the British Library in London, the Bibliotheque Nationale in Paris, or the Australian National Library in Canberra, some sources that are a bit closer to home and thus perhaps a bit more useful are NOT available -- e.g., the Metro Toronto Reference Library and the National Library in Ottawa. But those problems can't be blamed on the Free-Net.

If all this sounds intriguing, how do you get access to it? First, you have to have a computer equipped with a modem. If you have a computer that lacks a modem you can probably add one to your system for no more than \$200 (hardware and installation). Once you have the computer and modem, you use the modem to dial 684-6736, the number for the Niagara Free-Net . . . and then follow the instructions and start digging for your Heritage information!

The cost of the service? For what one might call passive use -- the ability to scan the Niagara History/Heritage listings or to peruse library catalogues around the world -- the service is free. For more active use -- not only reading what is posted but also replying to queries or posting messages of your own -- you are encouraged (but not required) to make a modest contribution (perhaps \$20) to the Niagara Freenet.

The Niagara Free-Net will open up a whole new world of possibilities for you!

Note: special thanks are owed to Claire Beckermann, Inge Saczkowski and Andrew Porteus of the Niagara Falls Public Library. They work diligently on their own time to receive up-to-date Heritage information from all over Niagara and put it onto the Free-Net. If you have information on Heritage events that you would like announced via the Free-Net, you can fax it to them (356-7004), telephone them (356-8080), or mail it to the Niagara Falls Public Library, 4848 Victoria Avenue, Niagara Falls, Ontario, L2E 4C5.

IN THE WORKS . . .

Now that we have talked about the gee-whiz world of cyberspace, let's come back down to earth. For the foreseeable future MOST people are going to continue to rely for their information on paper and ink, not computers and modems. And while the Free-Net becomes ever better and better, other people are working on publishing projects that parallel some of the services available via the Free-Net:

A Heritage Who's Who for Niagara:

For some months now Marilyn Jackson (former Chairman of the Niagara Branch of the Ontario Genealogical Society) and Gail Benjafield (Special Collections Librarian at the St. Catharines Public Library) have been compiling a printed directory of heritage resources in the Niagara Peninsula -- a comprehensive listing of museums, historical societies, any and all other Heritage-related organizations, as well as individuals notable for their role in promoting Heritage in Niagara. Marilyn and Gail expect a first edition of that directory to be available this fall. This project was inspired by Who's Who in Heritage in Hamilton-Wentworth, published there since the early 1990's.

A Niagara Heritage Newsletter:

For the past year an informal Heritage forum open to all Heritage organizations in Niagara has been meeting regularly. At their March 25th meeting they decided to begin work on a Niagara Region newsletter that would provide a forum for Heritage groups in this region to tell each other and the public about themselves and their latest activities. This project was inspired by a newsletter called the Heritage Hearth that has been available in the Halton Region since 1990. Frank Caplan, retired teacher and former chairman of the St. Catharines Museum Board, and Dennis Gannon of this Historical Society volunteered to prepare a first draft of such a newsletter, to be available at the forum's next meeting, Saturday, April 29.

Next Year's John Butler Bicentennial:

Since late last November there have been regular meetings to plan an appropriate bicentennial commemoration of the May 1796 death of John Butler, leader of Butler's Rangers during the American Revolutionary War. The latest plans foresee: a day-long history conference in Niagara-on-the-Lake on Saturday, May 11, **1996**, a banquet that evening at the Lake Street Armouries in St. Catharines, and a "drum-head" religious service the following day at Lake Lodge in Niagara-on-the-Lake.

ERRATA:

Our December newsletter's review of Hugh Gayler's Niagara's Changing Landscapes failed to note that the book is available not only in a hardcover edition costing \$34.95, but also in a paperback edition selling for \$22.50. That edition of the book is on sale at Beatties' downtown and also at the Brock University Book Store.

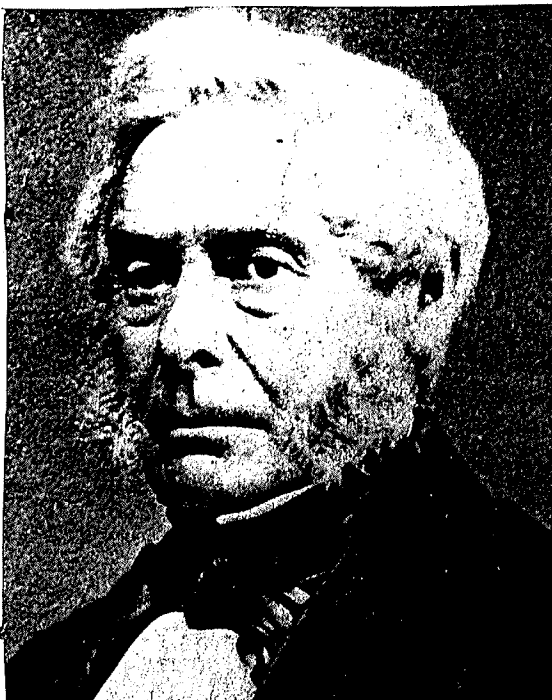
"THAT PRINCE OF CANADIAN HUMBUGS . . ."

Editor's Note:

Brian Narhi is a native of St. Catharines , an intrepid researcher in the fields of local history and genealogy , and has written books on the Hostetter and Schultis families of Niagara. Brian now spends most of his time in Toronto, where he is working on his Ph.D. in comparative literature at the University of Toronto. About a year ago, while prowling through the used bookstores of Toronto, he bought a copy of William Lyon Mackenzie's legislative hearings into the actions of the Welland Canal Company in the mid-1830's -- and thus was born the following article:

The Roman historian Polybius wrote in his Universal History:

For just as a living creature, if it is deprived of its eyesight, is rendered completely hapless, so if history is deprived of the truth, we are left with nothing but an idle, unprofitable tale. We must therefore not shrink from accusing our friends or praising our enemies, nor need we be afraid of praising or blaming the same people at different times, since it is impossible that men who are engaged in public affairs should always be in the right, and unlikely that they should always be in the wrong. We must therefore detach ourselves from the actors in our story, and apply to them only such statements and judgements as their conduct deserves. (Polybius, Historiae, I.14)

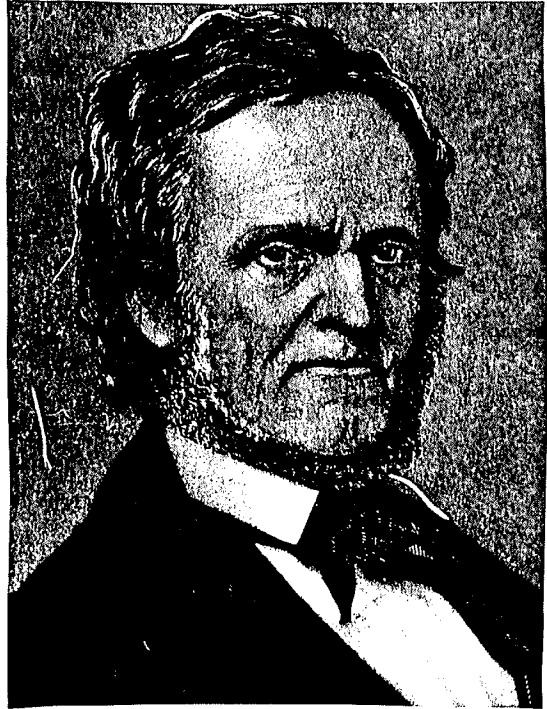


William Hamilton Merritt
(1793-1862)

Despite Polybius' recommendations that history be truthful, we as historians know that the chronicle of the past is not an impartial undertaking. Documentary sources for historical events are always subjective, written from a particular perspective and always read and interpreted from yet another point of view. History is somewhat like studying an object under water -- you will always find some degree of distortion.

In Niagara we find a prime example of what Polybius means when try to assess the contributions made by William Hamilton Merritt. From childhood most of us have been taught to pronounce Merritt's name with reverence, and there is no doubt that he was an enterprising man of foresight from whom the Niagara district profited immensely.

However, there are documents from the 1830's which suggest that Merritt was not "always in the right." One is a substantial volume called the "Third Report from the Select Committee Appointed to Examine and Enquire into the Management of the Welland Canal." It formed an appendix to the Journal of the House of Assembly, 1836-7. The other document is less well known but will be of great interest to local historians -- a newspaper called The Welland Canal, published by William Lyon Mackenzie in Toronto in 1835.



**William Lyon Mackenzie
(1795-1861)**

This newspaper was edited by Mackenzie and printed by Reynolds, and ran for three issues (December 16, 23, and 30, 1835), with a fourth issue planned for January 13, 1836. The paper was distributed gratis by Mackenzie, who stated that he had no objection to a canal or the junction of the lakes, only to the mismanagement of the canal by its directors.

The work is in a very insecure and unfinished state, the directors are entering into extensive contracts, with no means to pay . . . it may become a question . . . what should be done, whether it is to be completed or abandoned to the persons who have hitherto, unfortunately for the colony, controlled its operations.

In its first few years the canal had failed to realize a return on its investment; an alarmed Chief Justice Robinson wrote to Merritt in 1834 saying "if the Welland Canal now gives a return of £4,000, to doubt whether it will in a few years pay £25,000, is no more reasonable than to doubt whether a calf, if it lives, can ever become a cow." Mackenzie, with his characteristic wit, incorporated this quote into the masthead of his paper.

Merritt himself mentioned Mackenzie's newspaper in a letter to his father on March 6, 1836.

You are aware that the House of Assembly appointed William Lyon Mackenzie, a violent and unprincipled party man, as one of our Directors last year. This man, for certain party purposes, purchased a paper called The Welland Canal, making sundry charges against the management of the Company, but principally aimed at myself . . . Now, as you are well aware of the "justice" which partisans or party men generally award to their opponents, you may readily infer what chance we have of a fair and impartial investigation.

The Welland Canal
A WEEKLY JOURNAL,
 By **W. L. MACKENZIE**, Member of the House of Assembly of Upper Canada, and Director
 of the Welland Canal Company.

"If the Welland Canal now gives a return of £1,000, to doubt whether it will in a few years pay £25,000, is no more reasonable than to doubt whether a Calf, if it lives, can ever become a Cow."—Extract of a Letter addressed by Chief Justice Robinson to Mr. President Merritt, dated Toronto, December 18th, 1834.

No. 2.

TORONTO, WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 23 1835.

Gratis.

**The Masthead of the December 23, 1835,
 Issue of Mackenzie's Newspaper**

Merritt was confident that he could answer all charges, but would the end result justify the means of the investigation? (Biography of the Hon. W. H. Merritt, M.P., p. 160).

Mackenzie summed up his role in this affair with a simple quote in his paper, "Johnny has upset the coach." (December 30). He made some serious charges in the paper about canal operations, and 32 charges were brought out in the subsequent investigation. Among them he cited: improper accounts (false entries and erasures); defalcation of Grand River claim money by Mr. Black; irregularities in the election of Canal directors; duping investors into securing canal stock; canal contracts, mill seats and hydraulic leases granted to "favourites"; and large amounts of money unaccounted for and written off as bad debts (e.g., Oliver Phelps, \$30,000).

Of all the men associated with the Canal, Mackenzie seems to have liked Judge Butler of Niagara.

I wish we had more like him in the legislature of the country. He exercised a sound discretion at the Board, and was always the foremost to court inquiry and to exert himself to promote to the utmost of his power and ability every proposition for economy, retrenchment, and the most ample investigation, affect whom it might. (December 16, p. 2)

Mackenzie found Col. John Clark inept as a Secretary, and considered him "incapable either of posting the Books or of judging of their correctness and has never (as he himself admits) written a line in the Ledgers or Journal, and seldom, if ever, examined what had been written by others." (December 16, page 1). The canal bookkeeper, Patrick Grant Beaton, was "of intemperate habits . . . absent, and it is believed drunk, a state not unusual to him . . . the Secretary to the Canal Company has sometimes been absent for a week at Niagara, the clerk absent at the bottle." (*ibid.*)

Predictably, Mackenzie was hardest on Merritt himself. He described Merritt as "the prime mover of the whole machine, the other officers taking the course he prescribes as well with the accounts and money as with everything else." Merritt was accused of, among other things, charging needless contingencies to the Canal Company, includ-

Story series. Foley, writer of the weekly "The Niagara Story" column in the St. Catharines Standard, will be present to autograph your copies of the book. (984-8880).

May 4 (Thursday):

7:00 p.m., St. Catharines Museum:

Gary Konkle of the Friends of Morningstar Mill will speak in the Burgoyne Room, St. Catharines Museum, about his group's efforts to restore the Mill and Miller's House at Decew Falls to their original condition (984-8880).

******* 7:30 p.m., St. Catharines Public Library:**

Prof. Carmela Patrias of Brock University addresses the Historical Society of St. Catharines on the subject "Immigration History as Local History," illustrating her points with examples drawn from St. Catharines and the Niagara region (682-6053).

May 5 (Friday), 12 noon, City Hall, St. Catharines:

A ceremony on the City Hall steps will commemorate the 50th anniversary of the end of the Second World War in Europe. The event will be marked by the ringing of all the city's church bells, beginning at noon and lasting for five minutes.

******* May 6 (Saturday), 10:00 a.m., downtown St. Catharines:**

The 19th Annual Oille Potting Ceremony, sponsored by the Historical Society in honour of the multi-talented Mayor/Entrepreneur/Doctor Lucius Oille (at the Oille Fountain, corner of James and King Streets. (682-6053)

May 6-July 4, 1995, St. Catharines Museum:

"Bicycles Then and Now," a special exhibit on a century of cycling in St. Catharines and unique, hands-on bicycles from the Ontario Science Centre (984-8880).

May 9-October 1995, the Mackenzie Heritage Printery, Queenston:

All summer the Printery will have a special display of colourful posters for circuses, agricultural fairs, horse shows, and World War II Victory Bonds. (262-5676).

May 13-14 (Saturday-Sunday), Fort George, Niagara-on-the-Lake:

Thirty to fifty military re-enactors gather at Fort George to depict American troops during their occupation of the fort during the War of 1812. There will be displays of period marching and firing, and the "soldiers" will set up camp at the Fort, preparing their food and generally living like soldiers of the early 19th century. The public is welcome, 9:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. each day. (Admission: \$4 for adults.) (468-4257)

June 3 (Saturday), 11a.m.-6p.m., Lake Ontario/Niagara River:

Niagara College sponsors a six-hour-long historical cruise of Lake Ontario and the Niagara River on a tall ship. Historical commentary will be provided by Brock University History Professor Wes Turner. The cruise also will include a continental breakfast and a full-course roast beef and BBQ ribs dinner. (For further information regarding costs, etc., call Shirley Tomovic at 735-2211, x7510.)

June 17 (Saturday), Hamilton/Burlington, all day:

The Canadian Canal Society sponsors a field trip to Hamilton and vicinity, including a boat ride around Burlington Bay, a visit to the Desjardins Canal, and lunch at Hamilton Yacht Club. This event is for members of the Canal Society, but membership only costs \$10. (For further information, call John Burtiak at 688-5550, x3264.)

June 24 (Saturday), Grand River/Haldimand County:

The Lundy's Lane Historical Society's spring bus tour will feature a ride along the Grand River from Cayuga to Dunnville, with stops at the Haldimand County Museum in Cayuga, the Ruthven estate with its beautiful neo-classical mansion overlooking the Grand River, and the nearby "ghost town" of Indiana. (358-5082.)