

12-30-76

'The End Of The Ridge Road Trail'

By William Aeberli

The history of the Niagara Frontier is a voluminous series of dramatic events embedded in European exploitation of a section of an American wilderness, its territorial jurisdiction, military engagements, and the effects of colonial expansion which came to a head at the turn of the 19th century. But what will always remain significant with Niagara was the vast wilderness gulf that for almost two centuries separated the region from Britain's Atlantic seaboard claims and French-held possessions on the Lower St. Lawrence; this alone gave Niagara its unique expression of outpost individuality years before the Ridge Road was even remotely settled.

Since so many things occurred in northwestern New York which left enduring marks to present times, it is not surprising the abiding spirit of Old Niagara remains, despite modern, urban-industrial sprawl entrenched along the upper river banks at the Great Falls to points which join with a more tranquil environment northward below the Escarpment.

Here we have a homogeneity of varied manufactories, electric power complexes, tourist attractions, and rural belts woven into a restless movement of modern humanity.

There is much to see and feel along the Niagara River--what is presented today in contrast to centuries past, always in particular relation to man's trek into the corner of western New York's wilderness bounded by Erie and Ontario.

What better place than Lewiston Township for translating Niagara's bygone days, or an analysis of Niagara's modern-day existence! For example, a few miles north of The Great Cascades lies Lewiston Township and its village--one of the most historic spots in America as well as the ancient terminus of our Ole Ridge Road.

Today, the waters of Niagara are harnessed for power at Lewiston, merging local industrialism with the region's agricultural vitality--here we may study the enduring parallels of Niagara's original potentials in the now sophisticated atmosphere of the 20th century.

Inhabited for almost 5,000 years before the coming of the white man, the village of Lewiston was an established Indian campsite when first

LaSalle, and later Champlain, visited and explored the Niagara River and Falls.

Known as Ongiara by the Neuter Indians (who were the first to greet the French coming up from the lake), the Niagara wilderness would come under the influence of French culture before the British extended west of Albany.

The friendly Neuters were practically annihilated by the Iroquois and replaced by the Senecas of the Genesee Valley who originated from Central New York as members of the Iroquois Confederacy; for over 1100 years the Senecas proceeded to dominate the Niagara Frontier.

The Senecas were warriors whose favorite diversion was war against other tribes outside the Five Nation Confederacy. Yet the Senecas established a trading post and portage route over the ancient trails along the Niagara River leading from the lake to above the Falls. Though vehemently distrustful of the white man, the tribe was pacified enough to subsequently trade in furs with the scheming Europeans.

The French were the first to discover the importance of the Seneca portage trails as a lucrative commercial artery into the interior. And by the time the British became concerned over French influence with the Indians, the Niagara Frontier was already fortified in case of war.

However, the ebb-tide of Red Man's rule actually began when in 1720, Chaubert Joncaire obtained permission from the Senecas to erect a more substantial trading post near the river banks. This led to the building of The House of Peace, a massive stone fortress disguised as a warehouse and trading post.

Joncaire's post at Lewiston continued serving as a depot for collection and storage of furs, but Ongiara was now named Lewis(town) by the French in honor of their reigning monarch.

When the French were finally driven out by the British, Lewis(ton) retained its name, but the House of Peace became Fort Niagara--today's lasting military citadel to remind us of French and British involvement for control of the Niagara Frontier.

What of the Ole Ridge Road, you say? Being tied in natural communion with The Great Falls as a direct route to the watery wonder of the East, the Ridge Road casts off its eastward role in rural servitude and becomes majestically referred to as "The Honeymoon Trail"!

Understandably, there are other roads traversing the county and leading to Niagara's matrimonial shrine. Yet, since stagecoach days, the Ridge or "The

Ontario Shoreline Route" has been the natural path for so many newlyweds and tourists--history, long ago, gave the old road the honor of retaining its regional title in perpetuity.

Oddly enough, and though the Ridge was first cut out by the ancient aborigine, the shoreline trail never figured into French and British life on the Niagara Frontier.

Not until around 1775, when the Mohawks came out in great numbers (by way of the Ridge) to settle at Fort Niagara, was the wilderness route better known to the colonists preparing for the Revolution.

Acting in the capacity as a large refugee camp, the British did their best to protect the needs and to accommodate all who had fled to Fort Niagara. But with so many centered around the fortified compounds and various other stockades, housing became a problem.

The emergency of the period quelled unrest among the Indians and whites and some form of unity prevailed while the fighting raged far to the east of the frontier.

Many from the Indian tribes, however, found it necessary to erect temporary quarters elsewhere and set up huts along the Ridge Road

"Lewiston Township qualifies as the first to establish an agricultural base West of the Genesee River."

The early years of the Revolution saw the Niagara Frontier swell in population from the east; Indians of various tribal affiliations, soldiers and refugees mingled with itinerant trappers and established themselves primarily from the Falls to the mouth of the river at Fort Niagara.

American forces never reached as far as Niagara, yet the British kept constant vigil for possible invasion. Thus, through the war years, the British not only had to maintain their garrisons with men and supplies, but had to care for the needs of Loyalist refugees and Indian allies who had fled to northwestern New York.

To offset impending starvation among the masses, since supply ships became few and far between as the war progressed, the British ingeniously put forth a plan to establish agricultural communes.

Members of the communes, including the Indians who for years had begun cultivating sections of land near the trading posts, were given seeds and farming tools. Special districts were marked out for farming purposes; land was cleared from the forests and a long-range program for the cultivation of crops, planting of fruit trees and bushes, and facilities for the storage of food was put into effect.

These emergency "victory gardens" were a success regardless of a series of poor growing seasons, severe winter sessions, and late springs experienced during the war years. In consequence, the areas cleared from the Niagara forests, in all probability, qualifies Lewiston Township as well as present Porter Township as the first to establish an agricultural base west of the Genesee River.

By their efforts, the British unknowingly were instrumental in spreading the early news of western New York's fertility. This would have an effect on further expansion of the interior when the Revolution came to an end, but also an adverse effect on the British, trying to retain their post-war foothold on the Niagara Frontier.

trail outside the present village limits of Lewiston. These huts were strung out below the Escarpment where the Ridge follows the contour of the terrace overlooking the Ontario Plain.

Joseph Brant, one of the leaders of the Indian allies, built his hut directly on the Ridge. And, having been converted to the Anglican church years before the war, Brant also erected a House of Worship nearby. But Brant would have a price on his head for engaging in the Mohawk Valley Massacres with Butler's Rangers.

Continued next week)