Reminiscences of Mrs. Gilbert Porte

By Harriet Priddis, May 20, 1902

Though the history of the pioneer women of London records no daring deed, like that of Abigail Becker, nor historic tramp, like that of Laura Secord, yet every life is a record of such patient endurance of privations, such brave battling with danger, such a wonderful gift for resourceful adaptability, that the simplest story of the old days must bear, within itself, the stirling elements of romance.

While they took no active part in the national or political happenings of the day, it may be interesting to us, and to those that come after us, to hear from their own lips how these public events affected their simple lives. For this reason I have selected for my paper the reminiscences of Mrs. Gilbert Porte, who is today, May 20th, 1902, the oldest continuous resident in London.

My parents, Mr. and Mrs. Andrew McCormick, left Donaghadee, County Down, Ireland, in April, 1829, and reached London, Canada West, in the early summer of the same year. I was then two year and a half old, having been born in Donaghadee on the 31st January, 1827. After arriving here, we stopped with my Uncle Owrey, at Lambeth, for some time, as we could get no shelter in the settlement till the Rev. Mr. Boswell left his house on the north side of York Street, between Thames and Ridout Streets, where Seale's Terrace now stands. It was a very draughty old log building, and the snow would come through the crevices in the wall on our breakfast table. But, such as it was, the only Episcopal service in London, at that time, was held in the kitchen of Bosello's house. As soon as possible, my father secured the grant from Col. Talbot of a lot on the same street, a block further east, and in the spring built a comfortable log house, which was the eighteenth house built in London; and we were the twentieth family to reside here.

The most important adventure of my childhood was being lost in the woods with my little brother within a stone throw of our own home. My mother, after missing us, searched quietly for some time, till evening beginning to close in, she became alarmed and called in the assistance of all the neighborhood. Our little dog, "Cubbie," came running up, barking and pulling at mother's skirt. Mr. Simeon Morrill advised following its lead; and, sure enough, that took them to just where we were--in a little shanty occupied by a tailor on the north-west corner of Richmond and York Streets. The good man and his wife had done all they could to pacify us; but we were in great

distress, for we knew we were lost; the forest was very dense and dark, and we had wandered about for some time.

The great feature in the landscape in those days was "the creek." I don't remember where it rose--away off in the woods, somewhere east, I suppose. It crossed behind where the Tecumseh now stands, and entered the river a little south of York Street Bridge. its practical use was supplying water to Morrill's and Hyman's tanneries. I can see it all before me like a panorama; but more change has been caused to the views around London by the cutting down of hills and the building up of gullies than anything else. A great many little, rough, wooden bridges crossed the creek. I remember one especially leading to Proudfoot's Church, which stood far back on the lot, so as to be on high, dry ground, on York Street, about half way between Richmond and Talbot Streets. London has earlier days than I can remember, for York Street Bridge seems always to have been built; and I have often seen it in the early days chained to the immense butternut trees, which were then so plentiful on the banks of the river, to keep it from floating away with the floods.

One of these immense trees at the foot of Richmond Street was quite a land-mark in its day. As it leaned a little to the south, its branches stretched almost across the river, and there was not a boy in the village who could not show you beneath their shade the best speckled trout hole in the world, and a comfortable seat among the branches from which to throw the line.

Indians were such familiar figures that the children had no thought of being frightened at them, though our mothers did not care to have them come in their houses from a general idea that they were not clean. They would sit on the side of the road (there was grass everywhere, when there was not snow), and we'd take out a pail of milk or buttermilk and some bread to them.

My mother had, one day, taken a fine batch of bread from the bake kettles (for we had no stoves, but open fire places with pothooks and kettles) , and set it steaming on the dresser. When looking up, she found the doorway darkened by a big Indian, grunting and pointing to his mouth and then to the bread. By signs she made him understand to help himself. He stalked over, took the biggest loaf and left. She always said he might have taken the whole six without her objecting, so that he left.

They were grateful, too; for one day two of them arrived with a stick across their shoulders supporting a fine deer. They slipped the carcass out of its hide, for they had it ready stripped, and grunting, "For good Cormick; for good Cormick," took their departure with the skin. Judge Wilson, who was a young man, then just married, lived opposite and helped my father cut it up and had one-quarter. Of course, all provision was useful in a new settlement; but venison not such a treat then as it is now. My

father once, going to the back door, found a deer browsing from the twigs of a tree he had cut down the day before. He did not have a gun on hand, and before he could get one, the animal was lost in the woods.

I knew McGregor's Tavern, which always seems to be the beginning of every London history, very well, as it was quite near our house--on the south-west corner of King and Ridout Streets. Ever since I can remember, even before the rebellion, it was a nice looking building. But I have often and often heard Mr. James Williams say when he was a boy about eleven (1826) , he was crossing from the Webster settlement to Westminster with Mr. Webster, they saw smoke among the trees and decided Indians were camping near the Forks. On reaching the spot, they looked on the very beginning of the Forest City. Two men had felled some trees, using the brush, covered with quilts, for their beds. The smoke which had attracted attention was smudge to deaden the activity of the mosquitoes. The men were busy preparing logs for the shack, which was to become a land-mark; and a tavern has ever since, and does to this day, stand on the site of McGregor's.

Mail came from the old country every two or three months, and one never knew when to expect it. I remember my mother once paid a dollar postage on a letter that had done some unnecessary travelling. We used to go to the post office out the Governor's Road, through the woods to Major Schofield's farm, where the Sacred Heart Convent now stands.

It was a log house of the usual style, though there was afterwards a frame addition added to either side. We always waited in the front room, where there was a fire-place, while the Major brought our letters from the room behind, as that was the family bedroom. Mr. Lawrason was quite an epoch in the town's history.

Other comforts of life besides letters were not to be depended upon, and were often delayed by wind and weather and bad roads. At one time there was not a needle to be found in the village till Mr. O'Brien's or Mr. Lawrason's new stock arrived by Jenning's teams from Hamilton. Mothers with ragged little girls, or hardly decently covered little boys, went among friends begging for the loan of the priceless little one-eyed machine. Finally my mother bethought her of a pin-cushion that had accompanied her from old Ireland and done duty on board ship. She ripped it open, and behold! a mine of wealth pushed into the sawdust by mischievous little fingers--needles for everybody. Neighbors were all kind to one another in that small community, but some were better able to help than others; and Mrs. Simeon Morrill was a true Mother in Israel to inexperienced young housekeepers, fresh from the country where bread and butter, candles and soap were bought ready-made. Many and many a day she spent in giving private lessons in domestic economy, and cheering hearts discouraged by hardships and incapacity.

Anecdotes of Col. Talbot's bruskness and eccentricity have always been plentiful and apparently interesting in the London district. He seemed never to forget a face he had seen nor a block of ground he had granted. My father bought from Mr. Van Warmer the south-west corner of Horton and Richmond Streets, and not finding the deed quite straight (the owner was an American who had not taken the oath of allegiance) , he decided to make sure by getting an original grant from the Colonel. The old gentleman looked sharply at my father, and then turning to his maps, snapped out, "I gave you a grant before, and why do you come bothering for more than your due?" When my father explained the circumstances, he was quite reasonable, granted his request, and freely discussed the prospects of the country and settlement.

There were plenty of good private schools in London from the earliest days. Sheriff Glass, in reminiscent mood, always declared I attended school with him in a building on York Street, near Thames Street, kept by a cooper and his wife. When the cooper got tired of teaching, he went back to his trade (the tapping of his hammer somewhat distracting our attention) , and his wife taught for a spell. When domestic affairs her attention, the cooper once more became school-master. I cannot recall this scene, often described by my old friend, but I distinctly remember a little school on York Street, where a big bear was chained up in the front yard, whether to keep us in order of for a plaything and pet, I cannot say. I was getting to be a big girl when I went to Miss Stinson's school, away up on North Street, now Carling, on the north-east corner of Talbot Street. The house still stands as it then was with the school-room facing North Street, but there is now a little brick addition on Talbot Street. Dr. Stinson lived a few doors north, in the house with a good many steps going up to the front door, now occupied by Mr. Pritchard. It is one of the oldest houses in town, and we thought is a very handsome place then, though it is much improved now. Young Dr. Owrey, a student of Dr. Stinson, was the first white man drowned at the Forks, but there have been many, many deaths in the treacherous river since.

After leaving Miss Stinson, I went to Mr. Taylor's school on Horton, near Talbot Street. The pupils were both boys and girls, and he coached students preparing for professions at the same time. While I attended, Mr. Thomas Scatchard and Mr. Ephraim Parke had desks on the girl's side of the room, and were subjects of great interest. Mr. and Mrs. Talbot started a school on the corner of Richmond and North Streets, where the Bank of British North America now stands. They were both considered very clever, but did not teach very long. The building was moved many years ago to a few doors further east, and may still be seen very little changed in appearance--No. 197 Queen's Avenue. Mrs. Talbot taught the girls up stairs, her husband the boys down stairs.

The town was growing rapidly; the rebellion was quelled. The military occupied the barracks and social distinctions were being marked by the time. I became a pupil of

Mrs. Pringle's Young Ladies' School, and I remember so well when Mrs. Richardson, mother of Mrs. Judge Hughes and Mrs. Judge Horton, started in opposition a more fashionable and expensive establishment, and took away quite a number of pupils. This, of course, raised some feeling of resentment. One day the girls, in passing, came up and looked in our window, naturally interested in the old place. You ought to have seen Mrs. Pringle's indignation as she exclaimed, "Go away directly, you rude girls. If this is all the manners you learn at your fashionable establishment, you might better have remained where you were." Mrs. Pringle was quite artistic, and under her instruction we did very elaborate and quite expensive fancy work. She used to paint the faces and hands on white satin, and we worked the figures and landscapes in colored silk, with varied success; every girl had her sampler in those days, while the mats and footstools in fine crewel work are certainly proof of our perseverance. Then we had many little notions which I think quite as pretty as the fancy work of the present day--rice work, pricked work, etc. etc. I never saw a rag mat till long after I married. Mr. Pringle was a gifted as his wife. He was a cabinet maker by trade, and built on organ entirely himself. He put it in the English Church on trial a few Sundays before it was burned down (Ash Wednesday, 1844) , and, as it was not insured, he lost the labor of years.

We celebrated the last coronation (Queen Victoria) in great style, though, of course, we did not hear of it for many weeks after the event occurred. But we were all ready, and when the news came a holiday was proclaimed, and we did justice to the occasion. Every window had its own candle, and in some few extra loyal or extra extravagant cases, every pane of glass, and when the panes were so much smaller than they are now, that meant quite a show. But the greatest effort was made just opposite the Court House. A big hole was dug near the centre of the street and filled with wood for a bonfire. Over it was erected a tripod of very tall posts bound together by chains, from which was suspended an immense tar barrel with the blazing tar pouring out from all sides and dropping on the bonfire below. I still think I have never seen so grand a sight.

I remember the anxious times of the rebellion very well, though I could never quite make out what 'twas all about. People who only read the account in the histories cannot realize the terror of the wild rumors, the difficulty of communication (and consequent suspense) , with fathers, husbands and brothers marching off to fight rebels, who were mostly neighbors from over the river.

One bright moonlight night, when one could see to read distinctly, there came a tremendous knocking at the door. My father called "Who's there?" "Hamilton (Sheriff) , and Askin (Colonel) ; come on, and bring your gun." "Haven't got one." "Then bring an axe-helve, stick or something. We hear the rebels are to take possession of the Court House. Who else shall we call up?"

They got together eighteen citizens who for some time guarded the Court House. Then the militia poured in from the country around, and we had ten or more billeted for several days. My mother gave them possession of the kitchen with the bedroom off it, and did her family cooking by snatches as she could best manage when they were away on duty. They lay on the floor at night with a big fire blazing on the hearth the whole time. One Sunday, following the first outbreak, the authorities put gates on York Street Bridge. I do not remember anything about Blackfriars bridge. Of course, it was built then, but it was so far away we children did not take it into consideration. It was years and years after before there was anything but a ferry at Wellington Street.

Life generally was disorganized; with the men away, women gathered in groups at each other's houses. As my mother had four children she could not well leave home, so the neighbors came to her. I have often heard her tell of one occasion when three friends were stopping with her. They saw a strange-looking woman come to the gate. When she rapped my mother called "Who's there?" "A foe" ; in a man's voice."Then, what are you doing here? This is McCormick's."

"I know it, the pickets are after me. Help me off or my life will be at your door." My mother gave him food, Mrs. Franks a shilling, and they let him out a back door. He ran down the bank and crossed the river on the ice, as he said he would be all right if he could get to Westminster. He had hardly got well off the place before the picket arrived, asking if they had seen a strange woman. They said no, but a strange man had gone by that road, pointing to the opposite direction taken by the fugitive. We always rather gloried in the rumor that this was Lyon McKenzie. My father was away most of the time, as he was color sergeant under Col. Askin. At one time, when they were in Malden, the Colonel said, "Come here, McCormick," and as they stood by a grave, continued with a sigh, "Many and many a time she has carried me on her back."

The regulars were sent for at the first outbreak, but it took them so long to travel the distance (the 32nd came the whole way from Halifax on sleighs) that things had pretty well quieted down before they arrived. I remember being so disappointed when I saw them march through the town, that their coats were not red; but a big soldier threw open his grey overcoat, and my small woman's eyes were delighted with the sight of the red coat, which afterwards seemed to take possession of the town. We had five of them billeted on us. Every resident was obliged to accommodate a certain number till the Government secured Dennis O'Brian's new block for a barracks.

Hard times followed the rebellion. Flour was $14.00 a barrel, and small loaves of bakers' bread a York shilling each. To add to the trouble there came an epidemic of hydrophobia. Whether one mad dog did all the damage, or whether it could have been in the air I never heard; but the excitement was intense, and a mad dog chase was a common occurrence. Poor little Cubbie fell a victim. Most of the cows were bitten and

sacrificed; and the loss of milk was a serious hardship to mothers and housekeepers in the prevailing distress.

The residence of the military in our midst, the contract for the barracks, and the start given to building generally, made life easier; and we young folks thought it quite gay. As Dr. O'Flarity, of the 83rd Regiment, lived quite near us on the southeast corner of Richmond and Horton streets, we saw a good deal of what was going on, and were once allowed to attend an amateur performance at a theatre on Wellington street, where the public library now stands. Standing trees supported the board roof and stumps, sawed off pretty evenly, supported the rough board seats. We went in a dark passageway by a door on North street. Dr. O'Flarity acted the part of a ghost; so I suppose the play was Hamlet, but that I don't remember. There were many complaints of the recklessness and lawlessness of the young officers; no doubt they thought they were out in the woods, and did not take into account the rights of property. As there were no bathroom in the barracks it was quite a common sight to see squads of men being taken down to the river for a dip. There was one company they called the "flying artillery." It would come rushing down the main street at any hour, and everything had to get out of its way; and it was only just out for a drill, or to exercise the horses.

The most important event of the military life of the early days was the funeral of Col. Maitland. He died at the mess house, about where Garvey's grocery store now stands on Dundas street, and was buried in St. Paul's churchyard. Being in the winter, the coffin was carried on a gun sleigh.

Sir James Alexander took the house opposite ours after the O'Flarity's left, and was very kind and neighborly. He was a fine looking man, very quiet and unassuming in manner; but Lady Alexander was a great sport, and a daring horsewoman. They had high hurdles built on Horton Street near their house, and used to run races and jump on the public street.

The big fires of London are now spoken of as being a blessing, making a way for better buildings; but they were regarded as a terrible calamity at the time; and there were dark suggestions of our town being doomed. I was married at home in 1845 after the burning of the old church (Ash Wednesday, 1846). Mr. Cronyn said he would not have married me in my father's house if he had had a church for me to go to. The next Sunday we attended services in the Mechanics' Hall, which then stood on the Court House Square, when the alarm of fire was given, and everyone rushed out. There were 190 houses destroyed before the fire was got under control. My eldest son was the first child christened in the New St. Paul's.

When the railway came in 1854 everything was changed. The last signs of pioneer days soon passed away. London was made a city in 1855. St. Paul's chimes called the congregation to worship. My little boys attended the public schools. Business men had private boxes in the post office, from which they took their own mail, and the Great Western train bore our letters twice a day past blocks of houses where I so well remember an unbroken forest.

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