

# LOOK AT OUR PAST: THE WELLINGTON COUNTY ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

by Linda J. Fraser

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During the summer of 1974 I was part of a four member Opportunities for Youth project which tried to compile a history of Wellington County, Ontario. The result of our project was a 2½ hour slide and tape presentation entitled "Look at Our Past", which is currently being used by the Wellington County Board of Education as a teaching aid in the instruction of "local history". Our group found during the research phase of our project that there was a paucity of information about Wellington County's history from about 1900 to the present. "Pioneer history" was well-documented, but this more recent period was a relative blank. Thus, our group decided to seek out some of the county's older citizens to ask them questions about this period of the county's history.

Our O.F.Y. group interviewed about a dozen people ranging from a retired street-car operator, Harry Beadle, to an active local historian and former newspaper woman, Mrs. Hazel Mack, to a very engaging Women's Institute secretary, Mrs. Harry Burr of Ennotville, Ont. We also talked at great length to Mr. Harry Hortop of Eramosa, Ont., whose family has operated 3 grist mills in Wellington County since the early 1830's. Mr. J.B. Nelson of Guelph filled us in on the history of the Ontario Agricultural College and Ontario Veterinary College, now of course the University of Guelph.

Being quite new at interviewing we encountered many difficulties. For instance we found it difficult to keep the interviewees on track, thus our tapes have a distinct rambling quality. We also found it hard to allay nervousness in the interviewees - particularly when we were often unsure of ourselves. Many of the older people seemed quite suspicious of the recording instruments; it probably didn't help

much that we were doing our tapings during the height of the Watergate scandal. Finally, our budget was so low that we were forced to use "army issue" equipment that squeaked and rattled quite audibly during the taping sessions. Most annoying!

When it was all over, we discovered that there was very little of use to us in our project as our focus had shifted from a modern history to a history of industrialization in the late 1800's in the various regions of the county, particularly the part the railroads and mechanization played in nurturing industrial growth.

Still, we managed to keep some of the interview tapes. These are: 1) tapes of Mrs. Harry Burr of Ennotville, Ont., containing a wonderful description of the 1923 cyclone that flattened large portions of Wellington County; 2) tapes of Mr. J.B. Nelson of Guelph describing some of the early days of the Ontario Agricultural College and pointing out changes in student life-styles from those early days (1925); and 3) tapes of Mr. Ross Doddington, former owner of the George Drew house in Elora, Ont. This tape contains excellent descriptions of the architectural features of the Drew house, as well as some anecdotes about the house's distinguished occupants. It might be added that Mr. Doddington is one of the Festival Singers of Canada. Finally, as I mentioned before I have duplicate tapes of the narrative portion of our project.