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A BRIEF HISTORY OF TORONTO

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Toronto today is a vibrant, picturesque town on the western side of Lake Macquarie. It retains its village atmosphere, although its population is continually expanding. Before being the large thriving town that it is now, it was a popular picnic and holiday resort. Even earlier, it was a mission site, and before this, it was part of the tribal lands of the Awabakal people.

Known to Aborigines as Pondee, it was shown on old maps as being in the district of Derambambah. It was named "Ebenezer Estate" by Reverend L.E. Threlkeld, who had received a grant of more than one thousand, two hundred and eighty acres, from Governor Darling in 1829. Reverend Threlkeld had previously opened a mission in Belmont, where he spent four years. After receipt of his new grant, he moved his mission to where the Toronto Hotel now stands. Ralph Robey then bought the entire estate for £3450. In 1850, the area close to the mission buildings was advertised for lease, and Richard Fennell took over until 1870, when the Excelsior Land, Investment and Banking Company bought Ebenezer Estate for £13,722. They changed the name of the Estate to Toronto in 1884, when they opened the subdivision for sale. Toronto, an Iriquois Indian word meaning "meeting place", was chosen in honour of the champion rower, Edward Hanlan, who lived in Toronto, Canada. The company envisaged Toronto as the rowing capital of Australia.

The Excelsior Land, Investment and Banking Company hailed Toronto as the "Australian Sanitarium", and "any person who lived at Toronto for three months of the year, would add 20% to his life." The company offered relatively large blocks for sale, for between £150 and £200. This amount was not within the reach of the average worker, but the company provided their own finance. Any land buyer would be advanced up to 90% of the cost of building a house, providing the house plans were approved by the director. The company also offered their own

designs. The cost of building a modest two bedroom home, with a verandah, kitchen and pantry, dining room, drawing room and two servants rooms, was estimated at £620.¹

The Toronto Boulevard at the start of this century saw a post office, A.E. Shephards' Bakery with Mr. Thomas' Butchery across the street. Bob Walker had a general store, and Mr. Windross had tea-houses, made of bush timber with the roof and sides made of ti-tree. The School of Arts, which also had a library of over two thousand books, graced the site of the present community hall and library. Next door was the double storey building of E. King, shopkeeper. There were only seven private dwellings on the South side of the Boulevard, as Toronto at that time catered mainly to day-tripping picnickers and holiday-makers.

The Toronto Hotel, completed in 1887, provided a luxurious vantage point from which to view the lake and its aquatic activities. A short walk down the Promenade, which, after World War 1 became Victory Parade, brought one to the railway station, and then to the water's edge. The Summer Tariff at the Hotel in 1924 was one guinea per night, and six guineas per week.²

In the same year, Thomas Charles Frith opened his new store in the Boulevard. The advertisements stated "I do not offer anything at cut prices to attract your custom. We hope, by dependable goods and faithful service, to retain the confidence and continued support of the people."

1. Newcastle Morning Herald. 26th. October, 1972.

2. TORONTO, THE RIVIERA OF AUSTRALIA. Souvenir Edition.
22nd. November, 1924.

T.C. Frith was a major influence in the creation of the present system of ambulance service in this state. After seeing the dreadful way in which an injured mineworker was treated in 1919, he helped set up an ambulance service which would be emulated throughout New South Wales. He accommodated the first settled chemist in the area, as well as the first doctor and dentist. During the depression, Frith's store became the registration centre for the unemployed and the issue of food relief. In 1963, Frith's spent £23,000 on extensions, a major part of enlargement and reorganisation of the departments. The hardware department was doubled in size, and on completion, T.C. Frith's store was to have one hundred and eighty feet of frontage on the Boulevarde. Part of his building was set aside as rooms for four doctors.

Also in 1963, Woolworths Ltd. paid £90,000 for land, fixtures equipment and a building for a supermarket. Peter Dierxx paid £6,000 to have a building erected to house his own shoe repair business, two other shops, and offices upstairs. The Y.M.C.A. built a community centre for £25,000. So, by 1964, Toronto had, in an area of less than one half of a square mile, eight grocery shops, eight service stations, four chemists, as well as numerous clothing, food and specialty shops. The area was also serviced by an hotel, and four large clubs.

One of these clubs, the Toronto R.S.L. club, had its beginnings in the School of Arts. A ball was arranged to help finance the erection of premises of its own. The caterer for this function was Mr. George Woodman, a local butcher. Mr. Woodman, a veteran of World War 2, settled in Toronto in 1946. He opened his first butchery in 1955 in a small shop in the Boulevarde. Even though Mr. Woodman had the fourth butchery in Toronto, a high quality product brought success. He soon found the tiny store too small for himself and his five butchers.

In 1963, he purchased the old Methodist manse for £4,300, and two years later borrowed £25,000 to erect a building large enough for his own business and a chemist's next door. Mr. Woodman was somewhat of a trendsetter in butchery in Toronto. He was the first to have a tiled floor, instead of the accepted sawdust, the first to wrap his meat in white paper, in preference to newspaper, and his shop was the first one to have air conditioning. Some of Mr. Woodman's customers were so loyal, that when they were working in America, they had him send his meat across to them by aeroplane. Even the larger chain stores could not lure Mr. Woodman's business away.

In 1972, The Newcastle and District Co-Operative Society began alteration and enlargement of its premises in the Boulevarde. Previously stocking mainly groceries, the addition of a departmental section was well received. The new building had rooftop parking spaces for eighty vehicles. The writer was employed at The Store at this time, and remembers working under trying conditions whilst the alterations were being carried out. Opening day was the 29th. November, 1973.

The Store has since closed, and the building converted to an arcade, but most of the old businesses are still trading. One still cannot speak of Toronto without mentioning Frith's Verdun Hiles, Woodman's Butchery and the Toronto Hotel. Toronto people seem to remain Toronto people.

Summary of taped interview of George Woodman, by Anne Woodman.

During the interview, Mr. George Woodman tells of his early jobs after leaving school at the age of thirteen. He discusses his war service and eventual discharge in 1945. He relates how he came to settle in Toronto. He worked for a time at the Royal Australian Air Force Base at Rathmines, and for a short time, was employed at Newstan Colliery. He returned to butchery in Newcastle, before being offered a job at Wangi, near Toronto. He left there when premises became available in Toronto. He opened his first shop in 1955, and after considerable success, he found he had to move to larger premises. He erected a new, large building for himself, with room for a chemist next door. He was an innovator. He was the first to have a tiled floor, use white wrapping paper, and he had the first air-conditioned shop in the Westlakes area. His meat was so popular, that some of his customers had him fly several consignments over to them in the United States, where they were working at the time.

He tells of how Verdun Hiles, a local identity, began trading as a travelling salesman, selling clothes from the back of a truck, building his business until he owned four shops.

Mr. Woodman explains how he was required by the Council to provide parking area behind his shop, and surrendered forty feet of land at the rear of his business. Parking has always been a problem in Toronto, and a few years ago, Mr. Woodman thought that that problem was solved. Some developers were interested in buying the entire block bounded by Brighton Avenue, Carey Street, Pemmell Street, and the Boulevard, but the plans were cancelled, so parking remains a worry.

Mr. Woodman was instrumental in fundraising for the Toronto R.S.L. and the Y.M.C.A. He remembers how the Sub-Branch used

meet in the draughty School of Arts, and how he organised boxing tournaments to help raise funds for the Y.M.C.A. building.

He also reminisces about some of the activities at the grand old Toronto Hotel. Although the swimming pool has long since gone, he remembers the water ballets, the champion swimmers brought in for charity functions, and tells an amusing anecdote about such a charity swim. He paints a grand picture of how the hotel was, and suggests it is not quite as fancy today.

Transcript of taped interview of George Woodman, by Anne Woodman.

- Q. Mr. Woodman, could you tell me a little bit about your life before you came to Toronto?
- a. Well, I was born in Cessnock in 1922, I left school at 13½ to work on a dairy farm at Muswellbrook, for 10 shillings a week and your keep. After some months, I was offered a job back home at Cessnock, and when I got back, I discovered it was 5 shillings a week delivering milk, on a pushbike, early hours of the morning. I also got a job at the same time on a fruit cart for twopence a day, after I'd finished on the milk run. I kept that for a short time, and got a job in a butcher shop, which I stayed at until I enlisted in 19, September 1940. at the age of eighteen and four months. I never went back to Cessnock. I, after serving in the 7th Australian division, and so many months in the 2/14th Infantry in New Guinea, I was wounded in '43 and invalided home to Australia in January '44, and was finally discharged in December '45. The fellow that I'd been working for in Cessnock had died so there was no job for me to go back to, and at this time, my parents were living down at Kilaben Bay, now known as Bayswater, I came down there and happened to breeze into a butchering business owned by Ken White in Victory Parade, Toronto, asked for a job, and he gave me one. But after some months, I was having trouble with my shoulder, and a job came up as a storeman in the rations store at Rathmines Air Base, which I applied for and got, and after some months, their caterer was posted away, and me having knowledge of the meat game, I then proceeded to do the catering in a civilian capacity at the Rathmines Air Base for quite some time. Newstan Mine Colliery was going full blast, they were looking for men, and I applied for a job, got one over there chasing big money. Didn't last long so I went back into the meat trade, and I worked in Newcastle for a time and I was offered another job in the meat trade at Wangi, which was going to save me considerable time in travelling, so I worked for Terry O'Brien at Wangi for some months and then Mr. Verdun Hiles Senior had acquired four small shops in the

Boulevard, and I approached him about getting one to start up my own butchering business and he gave me, he rented me a small shop, on the western side of the building that still stands. I started there in the latter part of 1955, I was assured that I was the fourth business, butchering business opened, and there wouldn't be much calling for it. But it wasn't very long before I had the biggest business, butchering business, in Toronto. And I was outgrowing the premises, so I purchased the old Methodist manse in the Boulevard, which was the Southern side of the Verdun Hiles property, or the Eastern side rather, and after I'd paid the money off for purchasing that property, I borrowed £25,000 from the bank and built the existing premises. I moved into them in November, '65. Soon, the business expanded further, till I had seven butchers, two girls, a cleaner, and a full time bookkeeping accountant. The number of units I was handling, per week, 27 yearlings, 200 lambs, 40 grown sheep, 30 bobby calves, and 15 pigs. and the most sausages that we made and sold over the counter in that shop in one week was 2960 lb. And I might add, that was the first air-conditioned business in the Westlakes, and we were the first ones to have a tiled floor instead of sawdust, I was also the first butcher to use use white paper for wrapping in Toronto in the post war years.

- Q. You were telling me before about some meat that you sent to the United States. How did that come about?
- A. There were Australian people who were working and living in the States, and they'd come back for a holiday, and they'd bought meat from me, mainly legs of lamb, pieces of roasting topside, and sausages, which I packaged in a cardboard carton and put in my freezing room and froze it down until they were ready to go, and I had to get a declaration from Maitland City Council to state that all this meat had been killed at Maitland City Council abattoirs which had an export licence number so and so. So they gave that to me, and I gave it to these people. The meat was packed in the hold of the aircraft,

which is not pressurised, and it kept it frozen, until they got to either San Francisco or Los Angeles, I forget which destination it was now, and they produced this certificate from Maitland City Council, which allowed the Customs to accept it and put it straight through. They discovered that they could do that cheaper and with better meat than they were buying over there. They finished up getting four lots of meat sent to them that way and these people are now back living in the Toronto area. One family is Joy and Wal Watson living at Buttaba and they can verify this.

Q. Did you have much to do with the Frith's?

A. Not really, only being a regular customer there ever since we've been in the Toronto area. We've never had cause to do our shopping anywhere else than in Toronto, we've always found we could buy what we wanted there. And furthermore, receiving your livelihood out of the town, we felt we were obligated to put something back into it.

Q. Verdun Hiles, that you rented the first shop in Toronto from, I believe he started out in an old blue truck.

A. Yes, just after the war. He was a fruiterer, prior to the war, I believe, and he became either a pilot of Liberator four engine bombers. And after he was discharged, he had this fruit truck and he started selling clothes around the Westlakes area. You'd see him at ten o'clock some nights coming home. And then he acquired a shop in the Boulevard, where the Toronto bus stand used to be, and finished up owning part thereof of the Toronto Bus Depot. Then he bought these four shops that the Hiles family still own, and he moved his business over there some years later.

Q. What was Toronto like when you arrived? Was it like it is today?

A. It wasn't very busy, but the people were a wonderful, helpful lot of people. And then with mines opening and the Wangi Power House we had an influx of people from other areas, Lithgow, particularly Lithgow area, and they bought properties and they built houses and the population sort of grew from them. But it's a much different town today with the clubs and

Q. I believe that when you, I don't think when you built it, but certainly later on, the Council required you to have some parking behind your shops, didn't they?

A. I was the first one in the Westlakes area that had that imposition put on me. The Council wanted me to supply car parks for nine cars. There was no access to the back of our premises so the Council agreed for me to pay £100 per car, which I did. And things were pretty tight, believe me. Money-wise, and I discovered that Council was taking land in lieu of car park, so I approached them and they took 40' off the back of my land, that's my wife and my land, in the Boulevarde, and refunded me the £900. That was at no cost to Council, apart from the legal fees, and they agreed that if and when they got access to that parking, that I would have to make provisions for off-street loading and unloading for the two business premises in that building.

Q. What's happening about parking now?

A. Well, a few years back, it looked as if the parking troubles were going to be over for the town, because there was a real estate agent by the name of Jerry O'Dougherty, working with a developers agent, named Murray Harrod, and they had plans and specifications drawn up, for a huge complex, taking in from the Westlakes Arcade right down and including the Commonwealth Bank in Pemmell St., and going South up to Brighton Avenue, that whole block, and according to the plans, there was provisions in there for parking for 800 cars. But unfortunately, that seems to have fallen through, so we don't know what's happening, where we're going from here.

Q. You've been a member of the R.S.L. in Toronto since 1946, a charter member.

A. Not a charter member.

Q. Not a charter member?

A. No, just an ordinary member, charter members started in 1917 or '18.

Q. Oh. I believe the R.S.L. used to meet in some premises a bit short of what they've got now.

A. Oh, she was pretty rough down at the old School of Arts, especially in the Winter time with the wind whistling through the cracks. Pneumonia corner. Anyhow, we had a block of land where the new building is, and they decided to run a ball to raise the money to build there. They formed a ball committee and they asked me would I do the catering. Some suggested any money raised would go to supply an urn and have coffee after the Sub-Branch meetings, and I said I would do the catering on one proviso, that any moneys raised would be put aside to start a building fund. There's still another two of the ball committee living here in Toronto. And that's how we started off, in a little shed at the back of that block, which that area now houses the kitchen, not the building of course, but we've gone on from there to bigger and better things. I think it's had four or five extensions and at the present time they're in the process of spending \$300,000 I believe refurbishing two new bars, dining room etcetera, it will be quite nice when its finished.

Q. Next door to the R.S.L. is the Y.M.C.A. building and you had something to do with the kicking off of that as well.

A. Yes. Me and my late father in law, Jack Papps, who was interested in boxing all his life, and a couple of other

chaps, decided to run boxing tournaments with the boys, we ran two in the School of Arts, which is the Community hall now, and also one in the old Teralba School of Arts, and the admission money, that was put aside for the Y.M.C.A.

Q. Who did the boxing? The boys from the Y.M.C.A.?

A. All the boys, from no, all the local boys. We had it well supervised so nobody would get hurt. It was a real fun night.

Q. And the Toronto Hotel has always been the centre of attraction for day tripping people and picnickers and that sort of thing,....

A.. I think it reached it's peak when Jack Kortum the publican then, built the swim pool. He used to fill it from the lake, and some of the locals used to complain about the pump, the noise of the pump going at night, but he had Australias top swimmers there, water ballet, one of them from memory was Lorraine Crapp. They had a band playing, they had drink waiters, food waiters wandering around, it was a real fun night. Everybody enjoyed themselves immensely. They also used it to raise money for worthwhile charities or organisations. One was either Caves Beach or Belmont Swansea Surf Club or one of those, they came over to have a swim - athon. I'll never forget this particular day, there was a detective sergeant that I knew quite well, and he sponsored one of these blokes, I think for a shilling a lap, and he didn't realize that he was a top surf swimmer, and he dived in and away he went. He was in there a bloody long time. I don't know how much the 'D' paid, but it cost him heaps.

Q. And they took that pool away?

A. No, they filled it up, it was a concrete construction, built-in. So they filled it up, I dont know why.

Q. Toronto Pub isn't quite like what it used to be is it?

A. No, no, no.

Q. I don't think there's any accommodation there is there?

A. No it's nothing like it used to be.

Q. There is a restaurant upstairs.

A. There was a dining room in those days, too. They had indoor entertainment, quite good artists, and top Newcastle bands, and you got in by invitation only. There was no fights, no troubles, it was just a good social night.

Thank you very much for speaking with me today Mr. Woodman, i'ts been very interesting.

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