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MYRTLE CROWDER with volumes of the Tweedsmuir History

Collection of clippings tells township's story

By Brad Honywill/Star Essex Bureau

OLDCASTLE — Myrtle Crowder has watched Sandwich South Township and the hamlet of Oldcastle evolve for 58 years.

When she and her husband moved to their Walker Road home, their street was a rough dirt track surrounded by acres of farmland and there were no services.

Since then, the complexion of the area has changed dramatically with modern paved roads and highways, industries and residences, giving an increasingly-urban face to the community.

While Oldcastle and Sandwich South have changed over the years, Crowder has been recording the evolution in what has become seven volumes of newspaper clippings, pictures and transcriptions from municipal documents.

Myrtle first started this massive undertaking in 1950 when she was elected curator for the newly-formed Oldcastle Women's Institute. Part of her job as curator was to compile a history of Sandwich South Township.

Called the Tweedsmuir History, in honor of a former Canadian governor-general, it covers everything from births, marriages and deaths, to fires, annexations and airports.

IF YOU WANT TO KNOW when the area received telephone service, for example, Myrtle has it in her history. If you want to know when Highway 401 and the new Highway 3 went through the area, Myrtle has the answer. Railroads, agriculture and water services also receive attention.

After decades of collecting stacks and stacks of information, the 79-year-old mother of three, grandmother of six and great grandmother of four, shows no signs of losing her enthusiasm.

Given an eager ear, she will quickly launch into an anecdote about this person or that incident she happens to see mentioned in a clipping while flipping through heavy leather-bound volumes.

"There's hardly a day goes by that I don't find something for my history," she says.

The comprehensive nature of her history has led more than one person, searching for clues for a family history, to her door. Others, such as professional historians, have called on her services for the writing of such works as *The Garden Gateway*, a history of the Windsor area.

Most recently the Tweedsmuir History was called into action for the writing of a township history, an Ontario bicentennial project. The history, expected to be printed in about a month, was prepared by University of Windsor student Laura Langlois, who was born and raised in Sandwich South.

DRAWING ON CROWDER'S WORK, Langlois describes the early history of such communities as Oldcastle and Maidstone, originally called Maidstone Cross, both of which developed as Irish settlements.

"For the most part, Maidstone was the central location of the Irish Roman Catholic community settled there in the early 1800s," Langlois writes. "However, it contained other European extractions as well, such as Dutch, English and Scotch, apparent, for instance, in the naming of the town. In 1833, Joseph Bennett christened the town with the name of Maidstone after his hometown of the same name in England."

The hamlet of Oldcastle also borrowed its name from the United Kingdom, taking the title of a community in County Meath, Ireland. And, like Maidstone, it was a resting station on the Talbot Trail for weary stage coach passengers travelling between Windsor and Leamington.

"However, the most significant factor to Oldcastle's development was the laying of the Lake Erie, Essex, and Detroit River Railway by Hiram Walker in 1888, which became the Pere Marquette Railroad in 1903, and the Chesapeake and Ohio in more recent years," Langlois states.

The railway contributed to the hamlet's development as an important grain shipping depot, a role it continues to play.

ANOTHER COMMON LINK between the hamlets of Maidstone and Oldcastle is in the fact both communities were once the site of toll gates established on the Talbot Road to help pay for its maintenance. The toll gates were eventually burned, as were gates at Essex, reportedly by vandals determined to end the charging of fees for the use of the road.

Transportation was one of many areas in which Crowder has specialized. An interesting tale of stage-coach travel on the county's infamously muddy roads during the 1860s is told.

"When the road was real bad, they sold three different fares," she writes. "First class — one stayed on the coach; second class — when they came to a bad spot, they had to get out and walk; and third class — if they got stuck, they had to help to get out."

One man reported travelling along the Talbot Trail by horse and buggy and finding a man's hat on the road at a particularly muddy spot called Willow Swamp.

"He got out and when he lifted up the hat there was a man's head under it. He was sunk down in the mud. He asked the man where he was going and the man said Windsor. Mr. Wigle invited him to ride with him. The man thanked him and said that he was on horseback."

AN ELECTRIC RAILWAY played a major role in the area after the demise of stage coaches and before 1929, she writes. The line was called the Windsor, Essex and Lake Shore Railway and included several coaches running between Windsor and Leamington every day.

"Maidstone Cross was one of the stops along the way to pick up passengers and mail," Crowder writes.

Incidental facts and anecdotes such as these fill the Tweedsmuir History, a legacy the former legal secretary will leave for generations of grateful historians.