

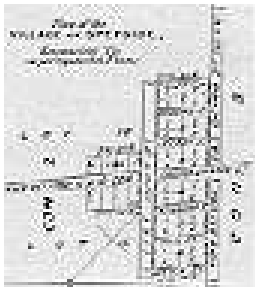


Historic Speyside

*Esquesing Township, Halton County Speyside General Store, 1953 -
Operated by the Douglas Family*

Today, what was once the thriving village of Speyside is simply a corner store and a sign on Highway #25, at #15 Sideroad, half way between the towns of Acton and Milton, Ontario. A century ago, the picture was very different - Speyside was a living breathing vibrant community. Speyside was named after the River Spey in Scotland and in its early days, the creek tumbled over the rocks creating a miniature waterfall.

Speyside at one time housed two hotels, a tannery, sawmills, shingle mill, a large stone quarry, a couple of general stores, a village hall, its own post office and a considerable number of houses. In fact, the registered plan of the village shows nine streets: Cruickshank Street (#15 Sideroad), Ontario Street (Concession 2, now Highway #25), Spey Street, First, Second and Third Streets, Ashbury, Mill and Water Streets.



Street Plan for the Village of Speyside - Halton County Atlas, 1877

The high elevation of the area along Highway #25 towards Milton gives a spectacular view of the surrounding countryside. Indeed, today on a clear day, from this vantage point, one has a wonderful view of the skyline of Toronto, including the CN Tower. Atop the Niagara Escarpment, Speyside is still an extremely wooded and rocky territory, apparently once covered with great pines, hemlock and cedar. Recently some 800 year old cedar trees were discovered clinging to a rock face on the escarpment nearby. St. Helena road is an extremely steep road off Concession 2 where it circles the edge of the escarpment, near Dufferin School. One of the first sawmills was built up in the bush where that road heads up over the escarpment. Owned by Tom Hume, it was a busy mill, supplying lumber to many of the local people. Another sawmill in the area, run by Mr. Cruickshank, made barrel staves.

Also in the area was a stone quarry, originally owned by James Hume. Stone from this quarry was used in 1866 to build Boston Presbyterian Church on the 3rd line. Many local area bridges also used this stone.

The Beardmore leather tannery in nearby Acton was advertising in 1875 for "good hemlock bark for which I will pay five dollars per cord at the Acton Tannery if delivered in summer." Hemlock bark cleared by Speyside area settlers was hauled along the narrow rough road through the bush from Speyside to Acton, and used in the manufacture of sole leather for shoes.

While much of the land around Speyside was rocky bush, when the early farmers cleared it of stumps and rock, they found it to be excellent farm land. According to the 1877 Halton County Atlas, hops were grown in the Speyside district, and dried by local farmers in their own kilns. Two drying kilns existed on the property of Robert Dredge for many years after they had outlived their usefulness. An obituary for Alexander Livingstone who farmed 100 acres of Lot 15, Concession 2, notes that "he was a farmer and gardener at Speyside. He originated the Glen Mary strawberry and grew it to perfection for years on his farm."

The one remaining vestige of the old village is the local general store. Opened originally by John Crawshaw, on land purchased from Ephriam Moore, one of the earliest settlers, it has run in that location under a number of owners, two of them being the Douglas Family and the Kelly Family. The building was moved back from the roadway when 17 feet was expropriated from property both sides of the highway in 1942 when the road was paved.

Across the highway from the store was the original log cabin post office, established in April 1873 with Robert McPherson as the first postmaster. The story goes that the postmaster could neither read nor write, but depended on school children to tell him the names on the letters! Robert McPherson was followed by James Conley, January 1884-January 1888, whose daughter Catherine carried on until April 1889. John Plank was postmaster from July 1889-February 1891, followed by James Martin, May 1891-March 1904, and Alexander McDonald, January 1905-1914, when rural mail delivery was started. This spelled the demise of many rural post offices, and Speyside was one of their fatalities.

300 acres off #15 sideroad was owned for many years by Dr. H.A. Beatty, Medical Adviser to the C.P.R. and head of the Toronto Humane Society. His love of animals led him to establish here a home and cemetery for stray dogs.

In 1873, School Section #10 was established from parts of Sections #1 and #5 (Ligny and Waterloo), both of which were considered too distant for the growing number of pupils at Speyside. During 1873, a frame building was constructed about one mile south of the village crossroad, on Concession 2. Called Dufferin School, the building was opened in January 1874. In 1903, renovations were made to the frame building, covering it with a brick veneer, and adding new entrances to the rear of the school. Originally with stairs and a porch across the front, new rear entrances on each side of the building, one for boys and one for girls, were deemed safer than the high front stairs. One teacher, nineteen year old Elizabeth Smith, who taught from January to December 1878, left an account of her Speyside days. They are published in the book "A Woman With a Purpose, The Diaries of Elizabeth Smith 1872-1884." Elizabeth Smith later became one of the first women in Ontario to graduate with a medical degree. Dufferin School saw many area young people cross its doors, and many happy times were held in the rural school, which was a focal point of the village.

In the name of progress, a new five room public school was opened in 1960. Built north of the crossroad towards Acton, the new school meant the busing of pupils from the District, and the closing of four area one room schools, including Dufferin School SS#10. The school was sold and became a private residence. The "new" Speyside School has also closed its doors as a public school.



Dufferin Public School - Esquesing Township - School Section No.10

Although still noted on the Ontario Road Map, Speyside is just a ghost of the village it once was. All that remains commercially is the corner store. Even the historic St. Helena's Road has been closed to vehicular traffic, but is accessible to the Bruce Trail and a beautiful walk along the top of the escarpment.

This pamphlet was written by Dawn Livingstone for the
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