

## **THE NAPANEE BEAVER**

**September 20, 1967**

### **ALMOST 100 YEARS**

This is a remarkable document written by a man who came to Canada as an orphan boy, virtually penniless, but who has never borrowed a cent, received any relief of any kind from any government agency, and never lost faith in the Canada that he knew and helped build.

He even declined the Canada Pension Plan when it came into effect because he felt it was against his principles.

All of this will be described in a two-part story which he has written as a Centennial project. In another era he might have become an author. He certainly is an historian.

His name is Walter Edwin Higgs, and he was born in the County of Middlesex, in the City of London, England, on Oct. 21, 1874. He came to Lennox and Addington County in 1889.

Here is the first installment of Mr. Higgs' story just as he has written it himself. This is how it was in this area in the early part of this first century.

#### **MY LIFE'S HISTORY: NOTES, EVENTS**

(Part I: 1874 -1889)

Mother, Thirza Higgs whose maiden name was 'Moss', died June 18, 1876, at the age of 37, leaving as survivors my father, William, whose occupation was seaman; an elder brother, William, named after father, and a second brother, Henry James, who was two years older than I. Her death caused a tragedy which entirely separated me from all my relatives, except my Grandfather and Grandmother Moss. I never saw my father and elder brother but once, and that was when I was very young. My brother, Henry, and I were separated the first 14 years of our lives.

Under these circumstances, I was left with no one to take care of me. As I advanced in years I found I was being cared for by my grandparents, who were then in their 80's. It seemed only a short time when my grandfather died, which left me alone with my grandmother. Considering her age and the responsibility of rearing me from my infancy, it must have been a hard task for her, but never the less she did it, and with the help of Divine Power she performed those duties well. I firmly believe she was a good Christian training and emphasized Proverbs 22: 6: "Train up a child in the way he should go and when he is old he will not depart from it." She gave me that training. How well do I remember, before being tucked in bed every night, kneeling with my eyes closed, my hands clasped in the attitude of prayer, and she teaching me the child's prayer in preparation for my future.

Could it happen that she, the only friend I had in the world, would be taken from me like my dear mother? Yes! It could and did.

I had just reached the age of 11, and coming home from school for my dinner, I found my grandmother ill in bed. Before I went back I fed her some custard with a spoon, and that was the last time I saw her. On my return home I was met by some person who conveyed the sad news that my grandmother had died.

My young mind went blank. I remembered nothing till later when I found I was riding on a double deck bus in company with a group of boys about my age. A little later we were transferred to a train and after travelling a short distance we got off at a station name Banstead. We were well out in the country not far from Epsom Downs, which brought us to a road running directly west, which led to the Derby races, which were founded by the 12th

Earl of Derby in the year 1870 and still active.

On my left of this road was a row of large pine trees, whose large roots protruded above ground and no doubt as old or older than the English Derby races. A little further on to my right we came to a high tight board fence with a rail on top showing spikes.

After walking some distance we came to a good sized iron gate which opened inward in halves. Inside a little to the left was a small building called a lodge. A man came out dressed in a uniform and let us in. In looking north about 500 feet, my eye caught an artistic building in which the superintendent and staff resided. I soon discovered I was in a boy's school under the name "Kensington and Chelsea District School", Banstead Epsom, Surrey.

About half way between the gate and this residence there was a wide road running east and west. On the east side was four cottages and a fair sized playground at the rear, and the same on the opposite side of the road. These eight cottages were lettered A R C D E F G H and housed 40 boys, in ages 7 to 14 and supervised by a man and wife who we had to address as Father and Mother. All the love and affection we received from our foster parents was a combination of orders and strict discipline.

As I was in 'A' cottage I can only describe what my duties were. Now a cottage that housed 40 boys was no small building, with its large dining room, two large dormitories, stairs, passages, etc., and had to be kept clean and in a sanitary condition, and we were the lads that had to do it. The father was a handsome, tall, well built man always dressed in a beautiful dark blue uniform with black braid and all the characteristics of a retired officer of the British Army. His very presence could create an atmosphere of fear, which it did to me, as the discipline was so strict and it took so little offence to receive punishment. His duty was to teach brass band music, drilling and punishing. He was well qualified for the job. He was also systematic, our names were read from a list and the kind of work which were to do.

My first job with three other boys was styled 'Dormitory Boy' which meant scrub and keep clean my quarter. As there was no water in the cottage I had to carry my bucket of water from a water shed at the rear of the cottage; at night it was placed in the hall just outside the door. Then up in the morning early, make my bed and with bare feet, trousers rolled up above the knees, do my scrubbing.

One morning after I emptied my bucket my feet were so cold I took a speedy run around the playground, which had a thin covering of snow. After dressing my feet, they went in reverse and got equally as hot as they were cold. A few days later I had chilblains and if I had a choice I would prefer the chilblains to the cure. However, with a mixture of screams and scalding hot linseed poultices, I recovered. My next job was to take care of the church, (Anglican) which was just across the road from my cottage. I had to ring the bell three times daily: 7:00 a.m., 12 noon, and 6:00 p.m, and while ringing, count 20 tolls. It was called "The Angelus", a reminder for the faithful to pray. I don't think I needed it, for through fear and dread of the advancing days I prayed to God almost every night to save me from being whipped. Next was lighting, firing, dusting and everything else to keep it clean. One Saturday afternoon I went over to do my work in preparation for the Sunday service. I don't know what made me do it, I took off my shoes and the father came over. I was too frightened to remember the scolding I got, but after finishing my work and going home my punishment for that crime was dry bread and water, I don't know for how long, but it wouldn't be any less than a week.

Now this school covered quite an acreage of ground. On the west half was a girls' school with 14 cottages, an infirmary, a church school equal to the boys, but quite separate. All I know

about this was when we marched past to go to a large field where we did our military drilling. It was so isolated that during my three years I never saw a female to my memory, other than the mother of my cottage.

On the boys side, shops were built for the various trades. Between the ages of 12 to 14 we had the privilege of choosing a trade and these trades were taught, by the fathers of the eight cottages. The week was split, a few days to work at the trade. I don't think I would be far wrong to compare it to the Kingston Penitentiary only on a smaller scale. If I had the naming of it, I would give it the title of a Penitentiary for Orphan Children.

The whole school was operated on the basis of tactics of militarism. Our drilling was all done under bugle calls, fire call, assembly call, advance and retire, etc. The assembly call which was sounded every morning at 8:30 brought every boy from the eight cottages out on parade, which formed eight companies, then inspection exercises, followed by drill. The drill master and bugler by his side, giving commands, just about the same as may be seen at Kingston at the barracks. This took place on the wide road which I mentioned previously. To an observer we would look smart with a degree of glamor, all being dressed alike, not in uniform, wearing a Scotch cap with the two ribbons, and the cap cocked a little to one side showing the part in our hair.

But wait, the observer sees a little lad who had the misfortune to wet his bed, receiving punishment by carrying his mattress over his head before the whole school, and that he wasn't the first one, during my three years stay that I saw.

We were extremely isolated. My brother, who was in 'G' cottage, just a stone's throw across from my cottage, I never got the privilege of speaking to. For our attendance at church service, the assembly bugle was sounded, which brought us all out on parade forming the eight companies, marched to the church and entered one company at a time to our separate pews, and the same after the service and arriving at our separate cottage were then dismissed. On going to school it was the same, drilling when arriving at the school, and dispersing and going to our various classes.

Our first lesson was Bible reading and my duty was to distribute the Bibles to the pupils. The teachers then gave out the book and chapter, and each boy read his verse by the point of his finger. Those lessons gave us a good religious training. I can't say much about the schooling, but suffice it to say -- we just had to learn.

The arithmetic was hard as it comprised so many denominations of currency, beginning with the farthing then the half-penny, penny, 'silver', three penny bit, sixpence, shilling, florin, half crown, crown, half pound, sovereign, and finally the guineas. Abbreviated, pounds, shillings, pence. However, I surmounted those difficulties, passed my examinations, and reached the sixth standard, which I found on coming to Canada the same as the fourth class in the public school. I never had the opportunity of going beyond that.

It would be unfair if I neglected to mention that we had time off for sports. In the large school playground there were swings, a large round about and several other things to give us exercise. At recess the teachers would play football with us, teaching us the game, and were good sports, but in the classroom--Wow ! it was business. We had occasional walks out into the country, headed by a nice brass band, and after marching to a few tunes were dismissed and allowed our freedom to pick a few berries from bushes along side the road. Our trips generally led to Banstead, where an old lady kept a candy store, and we boys who had a penny would buy a penny's worth of brown sugar or some other sweets.

The curriculum was about the same as in Canada. Every Friday at the final hour we would have a visit from a minister who would instruct us in religious ceremonies. Jokingly I said to a friend that I never could find time to be wicked. I had so much memorizing to do, certain passages from the Bible, Psalms 66, books of the Bible, Beatitudes, Apostles' Creed and a lot more which I'll not mention.

One afternoon I got a surprise when I found a number of boy's about the same age as myself in my class, when later a well-dressed gentleman from Canada appeared and gave us a lecture on Canada. He told us what a lively country it was and placed great emphasis on orchards and the beautiful kinds of fruit, which was quite an inducement to come to Canada, and all who wanted to go were to lift our hands. Needless to say my hand went up and that is how I came to Canada.

(Part II: 1889 - 1967)

Early in the month of March in the year 1889 I bade farewell to the land of my birth and goodbye to the Kensington and Chelsea District School, Banstead, Epsom Surrey. I leave this school with no prejudice, hatred or anything of that nature, while in my tender years I thought it harsh treatment to endure such strict discipline, in looking back into my long life with the spiritual training I received from my dear grandmother, together with the religious and physical training I got from the school, I must confess it has been a blessing to me.

In a day or two I start out on my journey and, like Abraham, not knowing whither I am going; and will endeavor to describe my 78 years in Canada.

Early in the month of March, 1889, at the age of 14, I boarded the ship SS Vancouver leaving from Liverpool harbor for Canada.

My luggage consisted of two suits of clothes, a couple of story books, a Bible and one shilling in my pocket. The 10 days crossing the Atlantic were pleasant. I was up early in the morning on deck, enjoying the fresh air and watching the huge waves. Evenings were spent with music, singing and recitals. Young as I was I had no thought of fear or danger. Late on a Saturday night we docked at Halifax harbor and I was in for a pleasant surprise, when by chance I met my brother, Harry, whom I had not seen for 14 years, and neither knew we were on the same boat. We were together just long enough to make plans to write each other when we reached our destinations. I had a fixed address and gave it to him. He went to Fergus, wrote me a letter, I answered it, and that was the last I heard from him for 15 years.

I was put on a train, the Inter-colonial Railway, and stayed on the train over Sunday and after three days travelling I got off at Belleville station and was placed in a home run by the orphanage to distribute the children for work contracts. I was there two days and on Fri., Apr. 5, 1889, I entered my new farm home situated in the Township of Camden, County of Lennox and Addington.

My master and mistress, to judge correctly, were on the border of middle age with no family. Before a month as a hired boy I discovered I was in a good home and if I had been their own son I couldn't have been treated any better, his wife was a perfect mother to me. So it is easily seen why I stayed with them 20 years. The first morning after a sleep in a nice feather bed I came down stairs dressed in the same suit that I wore when I came. With a smile the lady said: "You can't work in that suit, so go and change." Now instead of her husband taking me to the barn to show me what to do, she went. We entered the cow stable and she showed me in action and then left me on my own. That was my first professional job on the farm, cleaning the cow stable.

My first few weeks doing farm work was called “chores” and it wasn’t long before I found that word had a great variety of meanings, work all day showing no results. In three or four years I was well adjusted to the farm work and quite capable of doing everything pertaining to the farm. I mentioned wages to my boss but he was reluctant, and in place of wages I worked on a share basis, we both working together, and all I had for my 20 years work was \$620 when I left. During my 20 years I didn’t neglect my Christian Training, which was drilled in to me those 14 years of my early life. The first year I walked two miles every Sunday to Sunday School. The next year I rode horseback, and later on drove with horse and buggy. I soon became acquainted, and was active in all branches of church work and held several offices.

Nearing the age of 34 I felt that if ever I was going to start off on my own, the time was ripe. I hitched my horse and struck for Napanee. Within a mile of the town I overtook a man walking, I picked him up and asked him if he knew where there was a farm for rent. He said: “Yes, my sister has one, and the tenant has moved and it is for rent and possession at once.” I looked it over, drove back to town, went to the lawyer, Mr. Fred Ruttan, who did the business, laid down a deposit and took a lease for three years, and went back home.

I could quote several events of that nature that could not possibly happen by chance and I firmly believe it is God’s plan in working His mysterious way His wonders to perform.

My action in doing this did not dampen my friendship with my employer in anyway. A little later he said to me: “I would like to make an agreement with you -- if you will do all my fall ploughing I will let you have one of my horses to put with yours to do your work on your rented farm, and you and your wife may come and stay until spring”. I consented. I wasn’t married then but plans were made for this to take place Feb. 24. 1909. During our stay through the winter our friends and neighbors were kind to us, giving us gifts, showers, etc. In April we started out to face the responsibilities and obligations of farm life. I had to buy a horse harness, and seven pieces of machinery, which were really necessary. It is too much for me to write all the details, but suffice it to say we made a start on less than \$1000, my wife having saved \$400. I was fortunate in being offered a milk route which I accepted and it netted me a nice little sum. When my lease expired I rented another farm for a five-year term at Hay Bay. Previous to the expiration of the lease, I purchased a farm and gave a mortgage and after working it six or seven years, on the advice of my doctor, sold it. I got my price and cleared the mortgage and in 1920 bought a seven-room house in Napanee with nothing but the four walls, ceilings and floors.

Without any loss of time I got a job on the CNR with an extra gang at \$104 per month, and stayed with it for six months. I think in that year the Provincial Government established the Liquor Control Board and Brewery Warehouse. I got work in the brewery. I don’t remember how long I stayed with that, but the management was about to be changed when a friend came and told me there was a position open in the bank and requested me to put in my application. On Nov, 29, 1929, I started work as messenger and janitor and stayed with it for 16 years.

One day while on my rounds delivering and collecting drafts, etc., I noticed the T. Eaton Co., had a contest for penmanship. I slipped in the store and scratched my name. A few days later I got a notice I had won the \$10 prize. I never made \$10 as easy as that in my whole life, Nearing my 16<sup>th</sup> year in the bank I took a nervous breakdown and the manager forced me to take six months leave of absence, with the understanding my job would be open for me on my return, if I recovered. I weighed just 94 pounds. We had nice friends in Battle Creek, Michigan, who kept inviting us to come and as our friend was a graduate nurse, she thought with good care she could help me to gain my health. We went in December and in the middle

of March we returned home and I in perfect health took over my job. I kept it a few months and resigned, not wishing to go through the same ordeal again.

My resignation gave me the opportunity of living more at home and with the help of my wife I did upholstering, repairing and refinishing furniture, which kept us real busy.

As the wheels of time rolled on, we did too, and thought we were due for a rest. After 55 years of companionship, my dear wife passed away in January, 1964. I thought I could manage but eventually I sold my home and entered a nursing home.

I can truthfully say I never in my whole life borrowed a dollar from anyone, so I never was in debt thus I can cheerfully say I have never been any burden to Canada.

In coming over from my native land, although in a good home, I had to work hard and there were times when I felt weary enough to lie down and die. During our wedded life we worked hard, many a harvest my wife and I took off the crop alone. My wife could handle any type of machinery from the horse rake to the binder, while I would coil the hay or stook the sheaves.

We met all our obligations and never applied for the pension while the test was on, we thought it was like borrowing money from the government which was equal to a debt.

In closing this I want to show how a baby can be born into this world and be left destitute of mother and every relative, and by the kindness of friends and strangers, and Divine Power, be helped to become a respectable citizen in a strange land.