

What Do You Know?

By Ron Plaskett

What do you know about where you are fishing on the Saugeen River?

You know there is Denny's Dam and that there was an old bridge nearby. You even know about Thorncrest Outfitters with all their canoes and kayaks stored beside their house. You especially know know that the fishing is very good. But what else do you know about where you fish? Maybe this brief history will help you appreciate the area.

Bruce County was shaped by the ice ages, semitropical seas, and weathering creating the Bruce Peninsula with its distinctive limestone rock formations. Bruce County Museum and Cultural Centre houses a large 9 inch tooth from a woolly mammoth found in Arran Township.

The name 'Saugeen' is a corrupted form of a Native word meaning 'the entrance or mouth of the river'. Oral history from the Saugeen and Nawash First Nations suggests their ancestors have been living in the area as early as 7500 years ago. Hunters and gatherers of the Middle Woodland culture lived in the area from about 700 B.C. to about 800 A.D. The Huron Indian nation was in the area when the first French Jesuit priests arrived. Fur traders from the Hudson's Bay Company then arrived and set up a trading post along the Saugeen river at what was to be the village of Saugeen (Southampton).

Norman Robertson, author of *The History of Bruce County*, states that there was a fur trader who settled at the south side of the Saugeen River mouth in 1818. Other sources put the date around 1812 and that the trader was a Frenchman by the name of Pierre Piche.

In the mid 1600's, the Ojibway (Chippawas) sent trading parties through the area and the Iroquois (Mohawk) often attacked them. The Ojibway and other native groups forced the Iroquois out and settled here for many generations.

Paul Kane, a famous artist, who lived from 1810- 1871, visited the area in the 1840's and wrote "The Indian village of Saugeen contains about two hundred Objiways. It is a former battleground between the Objiways and the Mohawks. Of this, the mounds erected of the slain afford abundant evidence in the protrusion of the ones through the surface of the ground." He also writes of the abundance of fish and deer in the area.

At the Treaty of Manitowaning in 1836, 1,500,000 acres were surrendered by the Objiway to British control to allow the influx of Canadian and European settlers. From this came The Queen's Bush or the Huron Tract. Queen's Bush was the title given to this area to distinguish it from the lands belonging to the Canada Company, the German Company and others that owned large tracts of land. The present counties of Perth, Huron and Bruce were created in 1849 from The Queen's Bush.

The remaining land of what is Bruce County became the Indian Peninsula and was deemed to be located above a line drawn from the mouth of the Saugeen River to the mouth of the Sydenham River. This land was primarily comprised of primeval forest. Later on, there were more land treaties that incorporated the lands of the peninsula into Bruce County.

At present, there are two First Nation reserves. The Saugeen First Nation is near the mouth of the Saugeen and the other, the Cape Croker First Nation, is on the east side of the Bruce peninsula.

In the early 1800's, few explorers and settlers had visited the area. Unfortunately, records were few and the settlers' presence was not noted very well. They came from many areas in Upper Canada, Lower Canada and the Maritimes. Many came from across the Atlantic Ocean, from Germany, England, Scotland and Ireland, according to census records. In 1851 there were 499 families (2,837 people) located in and around Saugeen and by 1861, there were 4,665 families (27,499 people) according to the Bruce Genealogical Society – County History. However, another source (saugeenshores.ca – Saugeen Township)) states that there were only 200 people in 1851 with 130 people over the age of 20 and another 30 per cent under the age of 10. The Bruce County Museum and Cultural Center – Archives also says that there were 2,837 people in the area. I cannot explain the difference in the numbers.

Before the land was officially surveyed, the first settlers arrived. They arrived overland by walking on poor trails, by schooners on Lake Huron, and by rafts/ barges/ scows floating down the Saugeen River. The rafts were frequently heavy and unwieldy with one or two pairs of oars, and a long sweep oar at the stern. Settlers started off from Hanover or Walkerton to make the dangerous trek downriver.

A selection from the Paisley Advocate many years later (April 28, 1876) states: "On one occasion, early in the morning, a commodious raft passed where this village now is (ed. Note – Paisley). On one end was a cow with her calf, on the other along with considerable baggage was a cooking stove, in which was a good fire, and while the enterprising settler was attending to the navigation of his vessel, the good wife was busy at the stove getting breakfast ready. The smoke which streamed from the elevated pipe, gave the moving raft the appearance of a rustic steamer in motion."

In 1844, the Government sent out a party to explore the Saugeen River. Travelling along the Garafraxa Road, they reached the Saugeen River. They then travelled down the river by canoe and mapped the Saugeen River and its surrounding lands. (History of Bruce County; Robertson)

By 1851, the area had been surveyed and the Crown land was officially available to those who could make it here by land or water. Land cost two dollars an acre on July 30, 1852.

Somewhere it was stated in my reading that a peculiarity about the survey being worked on in 1850 was a 'Marine Allowance' along both sides of the river. A "Marine Allowance' was not included in any other survey.

Probably, fishing was the first industry and the most important in Saugeen for many years. The first manufacturing industry in Southampton was a steam sawmill owned by Messrs. Line and Hamilton. It,

unfortunately burned down but was rebuilt by William Bondy in the form of a steam grist mill and distillery.

According to the edition of the Paisley Advocate of April 28, 1876, there was an article about navigating the Saugeen River: "When the first steam sawmill built in this county, was to be erected in Southampton, about 25 years ago, it became a question of how large a boiler could be brought to its destination, as there was no road through the county. The boiler was conveyed to Hanover, if we remember rightly, and left by the side of the Saugeen to wait the turning up of some genius who would invent some method of taking it further. It was decided to make an ironclad of it and float it down the river.

All the openings were tightly plugged, and with levers and handspikes, the huge boiler was started rolling at a very rapid rate down the steep bank into the deep river at the foot. The boiler, being very heavy, and going down with great force, it at once disappeared with a tremendous splash.

The experiment was deemed a failure and the costly concern was supposed to be lost, but while the disappointed navigators looked on with blank faces where their craft had disappeared, it came slowly to the surface, raising its black shape high above the water. The boiler, which had started its way north without waiting for anyone to take command, was at once captured and a dry cedar log lashed to each side, oars were rigged and away went the strangest craft that ever navigated the Saugeen. The boiler was taken to Southampton."

Mill privileges at the Indian Rapids (the area where we fish) were owned by Messrs. Lines and Hamilton in 1852 or 1853. The rights were transferred in 1854 to Messrs. Dalton and McNabb of Toronto who started to build a mill race in 1855. They also started to build a grist mill.

During 1856, the two men sold the mill privileges and the improvements to John Denny. It has been reported that Mr. Denny was a descendent of the Denny's of Dumbarton, Scotland who were famous ship builders.

A map dated 1857 shows a grist mill (Denny's Mill) up and working at Indian Rapids. He also built 2 other mills – a saw mill by 1859 and a woollen mill by 1865. Together they produced flour, lumber, woollens and barrels.

John Denny also cut a road through the forest during this time to bring his family to live on the site.

To obtain power to run the mills, John Denny built a partial dam which went across about mid-stream and funnelled much of the water flowing in the river enough of a distance down a mill race to get the required flow to power the mills. While this was being constructed, labourers stayed/ boarded at the hotel.

It was a matter of public record by the tax collector of 1859, that the "total real and personal property or income" of John Denny was \$1354.00.

Eventually, John Denny owned the estate at the top of the hill, farmland, the store, the grist mill, the woollen mill, the saw mill, two houses for the managers of the mills and the Denny's Bridge Hotel. Denny operated the mills before retiring to Toronto.

After John Denny left, his farm was purchased by Andrew Ruxton in 1883, then in 1910, Mrs. Joel Eby purchased the land. Dr. Chambers held ownership briefly before being sold to William and Ida Donaldson . In 1926 the farm was eventually purchased by William Donaldson's son who lived there with his family for 47 years. It is reported by Jean Mills that the house was sold in 1973.

It was during this time (1897) that the mill/water privileges were taken over by the Saugeen Electric Light and Power Company to produce Southampton's first electricity. Apparently, the idea of having electricity made people worry that it would cost too much so they voted the town council out of office but the machinery still arrived to be installed at Indian Rapids/ Denny's Mills.

It was in the early 1900's that a cement dam and race was built for producing hydroelectric power. The power produced serviced the electrical needs of Southampton, Port Elgin and Walkerton.

Ontario Hydro took over as the main power supplier in the late 1920's. According to Gordon Kidd, who wrote an article titled 'Old Powerhouse Humming in the 1920's', when Ontario Hydro took over, all the machinery for the creation of electricity was taken out as Ontario Hydro's mandate was to eliminate all small power houses. He also states that the dam was "blasted out of existence".

The Saugeen River Conservation Authority built the present dam in the early 1970's as part of controlling the water flow, controlling sea lampreys, and for a fish ladder.

John Denny's hotel/ inn was a stop- over for stagecoaches and travellers and was sold to John Buckley about 1860. The Buckley family kept travellers' horses in their stables to be looked after and to rest for the next day's journey.

The Denny's Bridge hotel became known as The Bull's Head Hotel due to William Buckley's family's coat of arms which had Saxon origins. The coat of arms had a bull's head on the upper part of the crest and three bull's heads on the main body of the shield. Thus, the Bull's Head Hotel name.

Of course, the Inn keepers were gregarious people and entertained their guests with music and good food. The popular inn also had a bar for those who were in the mind to partake in some libations. Rooms were heated by wood stoves and water was obtained from a spring at the bottom of the hill. Water was also piped to the stable (not far from the hotel and by the road-side) and into a watering trough for the horses.

William and his brother Richard Buckley owned and operated the hotel until 1883. After William died, Richard took over until James Johns took over ownership of the Bull's Head Inn in the late 1890's. He also "owned Denny's dam and water power rights, and did milling at the dam." (John Weichel)

The Bull's Head Hotel was used for many years as a family home by a family called the Mathesons before being purchased by Tim and Janette Thorne. The couple own and operate Thorncrest Outfitters

in downtown Southampton. It continues to be private residence since the Thornes began living there in 2003. There are plans for it to become a bed and breakfast once all renovations are completed. Since it is a private residence, no tours of the house are given.)

Mrs. Thorne described the house/ former hotel as having two foot thick walls. The upper portion of the house had been closed up for many years before they moved in. The upstairs of the building has 11 bedrooms and there are 27 windows in the house to let in lots of light. The back part of the house has an upper servants' quarters and kitchen with the lower part being the owner's bedroom and kitchen. Water for the house is supplied by an artesian spring/well that came out at a spot higher than the house.

The house was in need of repairs when the Thornes moved in with many parts of the house being original, except for minor upgrades over the years like painting the wooden floors and two wire electric wiring.

During the mid-1950's a bathroom was installed in the house and used water from the spring. (Jean Mills)

Mrs. Thorne also said that she believes that the house is definitely haunted. Visions and sounds of a cat have been seen and heard by both of the Thornes. (They do not have a cat.) Also, the sound of a foot dragging was heard in their first few years of residence but stopped after the downstairs renovations were completed.

John Benner took over the mill privileges around 1880 and set up another woollen mill a little upstream from Southampton where he manufactured blankets. He had bad luck with flooding on the Saugeen River and was forced to relocate the mill to Inglis Falls in 1884.

By 1888, Denny's Mills were owned by the Routh brothers and employed 15 people. Unfortunately in October 1888, a fire destroyed the woollen mills and everyone was put out of work.

Going back to October 1865, before the Upper Canada government built a timber bridge over the Saugeen River at Denny's Mills or Indian Rapids (at an approximate cost of four thousand dollars including road improvements), there was a small, one-man ferry lower down on the river. According to an excerpt from one of John Weichel's books, *Forgotten Lives: Early History of a Coastal Town*, "The tariff for ferry use is as follows: Each passenger, 2 cents; Each vehicle with two horses or other animals, 6 cents; Each bag, barrel, or package with a team, 2 cents; Freight without a team, over 100 pounds, 2 cents; Freight under 100 pounds without passenger, 2 cents; freight with passenger, free; Each vehicle having paid twice in the same day to pay at half the cost."

Unfortunately, the ferryman was out of a job when the bridge was completed as were his two daughters who also ferried people across the river.

After the bridge was built, the people of Saugeen did not like having to go so far out of town to cross the river. Also, the southern part of Saugeen was growing slowly while the north side was only accessible only by boat. After Denny's Mills bridge was built, businesses in Saugeen discovered that

many people who crossed the bridge continued on to Port Elgin instead of stopping in Southampton. This started a movement to have another bridge built closer to the mouth of the river.

The town council of Saugeen at the time decided that “the sum of five pounds be given to any person who can furnish the best and most satisfactory plan of a bridge to be built over the Saugeen River somewhere between the Steam Saw Mill and the mouth of the Saugeen River at the most suitable place, for the least possible expense.” The founder of the town of Saugeen, Captain John Spence, received the contract but due to lack of money, the project was cancelled.

The Saugeen River has been crossed by bridges ever since 1865 except for one period of three months. The bridge at Denny’s Mills was built in 1865 but the Spring flood damaged it numerous times. For example, it was washed out in 1907 and rebuilt in 1908. In 1909, an abutment was washed away so that closed the bridge. While it was being repaired in 1909, two workers repairing the bridge fell into the river and drowned.

During 1889, a second attempt to build a bridge at Victoria Street in Saugeen was started. This bridge became to be longest bridge in the county at a length of 430 feet. In 1891, the bridge was found to be unsafe and was ordered to be taken down and rebuilt. Alas, in 1909, the Victoria Street bridge was again deemed unsafe to be used so once again an attempt to fix it was started.

During the building of the Victoria Street bridge, a Cross of Lorraine was found and is believed to be from 1773 – 1809. These crosses were made in Montreal and distributed to the North West Company and other fur traders.

Spring floods in 1912 took out both the Denny’s Dam bridge and the Victoria Street bridge at the same time. Travellers and townspeople needed a boat to cross the river from April to June while a temporary bridge was put into place. In late 1912, Denny’s Mills bridge was reopened to traffic.

Southampton was incorporated as a town in 1858, but remained being called “Saugeen” or “The Mouth” or “Sahgeeng” for many years. It was actually named after Southampton, Hampshire, England. At one point in its history, it vied for becoming the county seat with Walkerton.

Port Elgin was incorporated in 1874 but was originally known as Normanton.

During Southampton’s first year of incorporation reports show that there were thirty houses, three businesses and weekly mail. The Chantry Lighthouse was completed in 1859.

Bruce County was named after James Bruce Earl of Elgin who was Governor General in 1849 when the Queens Bush was divided up into Perth, Huron and Bruce.

When Bruce County was finally incorporated in 1867, a Bruce County tartan was announced, registered in Edinburgh and patented in Canada . The archive section of Bruce Museum and Cultural Center says that the tartan is “Steeped in history, the red, yellow and green depict not only the Bruce clan tartan but the beautiful foliage of millions of trees that cover the area. The white and deep blue represent the

glistening waves washing the 367 miles of shoreline bordering Lake Huron and Georgian Bay, as well as the many fresh water streams throughout the area.”

There have been several archaeological excavations/ digs in the area of Denny’s Dam. Pieces of broken pottery, flint projectile points and bone fragments have been found. Even some evidence has been discovered of an ancient cemetery according to Jean Mills in an article titled “Life by the River”.

During a dig in 1960, archaeologists found evidence of inhabitants for both Spring and Summer fishing encampments. This dig was formally called ‘The Donaldson Site’ and further study of the artifacts in 1971 show that this site dated back to 500 B.C.

Jean Mills goes on to say, “At the present time, the riverside property where the archaeological explorations took place is managed by the Ontario Steelheaders Association, allowing fishermen to camp there, for a minimal fee. The rest of the property grows weeds.”

An internet site posted by the Saugeen First Nation about the well-known amphitheatre states that “On the far shore of the Saugeen, the bones of warriors lie on the ancient battlefield known as “The Mound of Skulls”. The church is the site of the signing of an Indian treaty. The footpath running alongside the amphitheatre was used by long-ago hunters to travel from the hilltops to the traditional river hunting grounds. Close to today’s parking lot lies an ancient burial ground.”

According to the Ontario Steelheaders – Saugeen River website, “In 1996, the Saugeen Valley Conservation Authority (ed. note. – who owned the property) announced that Denny’s Dam Park would be closed to the public. The possibility existed that the park may even be sold”.

The Ontario Steelheaders approached the Authority with an offer to lease the park. The offer was accepted with the Ontario Steelheaders at a cost of \$8,000 a year with the Ontario Steelheaders paying for the lease, insurance, maintenance of the washroom facilities, garbage disposal grass cutting, and sign signage. Due to these costs, a modest day use fee and camping fees (daily or seasonal) are in place.

Many anglers use this park for seasonal camping and there is a waiting list for seasonal campsites. Overnight camping is limited to a small area.

The Saugeen River Conservation Authority says on its website that “Denny’s Dam Conservation Area is located 5 km north of Southampton. The area is accessible via Denny’s Dam road just off Highway 21, north of Southampton.

This conservation area is roughly 1.5 km upstream from the mouth of the Saugeen River. The property includes approximately 1.5 km of river frontage and is well known for its fabulous fishing. Fish species include salmon and trout.

This park is maintained and looked after by the Ontario Steelheaders Association. Facilities include privies, parking, and a picnic shelter. Somedaily camping is permitted at this park and fees do apply”.

For those interested in camping at this park, there is no source of water (river excluded) and there is no electricity available.

Across the river is the Denny's Dam Conservation Area that is owned and operated by the Ministry of Natural Resources. There is no cost to use this area daily. There is no camping allowed at this site.. It is an excellent place to use as a canoe/ kayak drop or pick-up for the upper Saugeen River. Boundaries of this area are unclear from the last report I could find.

Also, near Denny's Dam Conservation Area is the original cemetery for Southampton and area. It is on top of the hill near the present day cemetery. Over the years, it has become overgrown so a memorial area was created to honour the early settlers. Here, some of the headstones have been collected from the original cemetery (1200 feet deep and 500 feet wide) and installed in a fenced in area to preserve the stones.

To the north of Denny's Dam and along highway 21, a small park and Saugeen River access point for fishermen, a plaque was erected to the memory of Grant Ferris in honour of a great fisherman, conservationist, environmentalist, educator, and mentor to many fishermen. This was done by members of the Grey-Bruce Outdoors on April 16, 2008.

Today, the Ontario Steelheaders and the Lake Huron Fishing Club have joined together in a joint fish stocking effort to have the Saugeen River become the premier fishing destination for salmon and rainbow trout in Ontario. This ongoing project is already showing good results as the result of the many volunteers who help with the egg harvesting, work at the two hatcheries, and those who help with the stocking.

And there you have it – some area history in a nut shell. Some dates etc. are conflicting and may be argued but are as accurate as I can find in books and in the Bruce County Museum and Cultural Centre in Southampton. Various authors often do not agree on dates but I have included their individual information in spite of their differences.

Sources:

Bruce County Historical Society Yearbooks, 1967-2011

Norman Robertson –History of the County of Bruce

Bruce County Museum and Cultural Centre - Archives

Jean Mills – Life on the River

Saugeen Valley Conservation Authority

Ontario Steelheaders – Saugeen

Norman Robertson – History of Bruce County

John Weichel – Forgotten Lives – Early History of a Coastal Village

Paisley Advocate, 1876

Saugeen First Nation Amphitheatre – Internet site

W. Sherwood Fox – The Bruce Beckons

Gordon Kidd – Old Powerhouse Humming in the 1920's

Bruce Genealogical Society – County History

Southampton Vignettes

Andrew Armitage – Our History

Book – Celebrate Southampton – Past and Present

Assorted Internet sites including:

www.saugeenshores.ca

www.rootsweb.ancestry.com

www.electricscotland.com/history

www.brucemuseum.ca/archives-and-research/bruce-county-history/

www.svca.ca

www.sunsets.com

www.grey-bruceoutdoors.com

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