

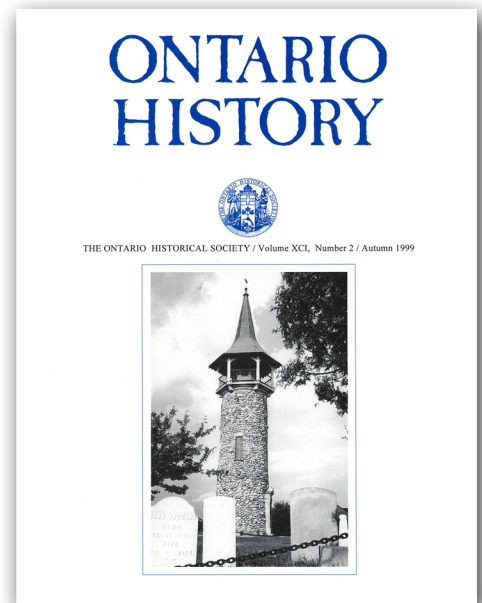
# ONTARIO HISTORY

## “From Berlin to the Trek of the Conestoga”

By Geoffrey Hayes

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# From Berlin to the Trek of the Conestoga: A Revisionist Approach to Waterloo County's German Identity

GEOFFREY HAYES

In 1919 the *Daily Telegraph* of Kitchener, Ontario, published its *Peace Souvenir: Activities of Waterloo County in the Great War, 1914–1918*. In it were the names of the 3,763 county men and women who had served in the war. Eleven pages of black-bordered photographs offered a stirring testament to the county's 486 war dead.<sup>1</sup> This was a war that had forever changed Waterloo County and indeed all of Canada.

Commemorations of this kind served many purposes, and they helped form Canada's collective memory of the First World War. A flurry of cenotaphs, memorials, reunions, poems, books, paintings, and pilgrimages to old battlefields helped create the idealized memory of a war where Canadian soldiers had fought and died for a just victory.<sup>2</sup> The people of Waterloo County shared in Canada's memory of the First World War. From plaques in Wellesley Township to cenotaphs and church windows in Elmira, New Hamburg, Preston, Hespeler, and Ayr, the county played its part in the act of remembrance. In Galt, Waterloo County's second city, 10,000 people attended the dedication of a war memorial in 1930.

Nevertheless, some important features of the war's memory held a troublesome meaning in a county which had once promoted itself proudly as a German-Canadian cultural and economic area, with the city of Berlin at its centre. In the popular mind, Germany and things German represented the evil shadow of civilized society.<sup>3</sup> To embrace the myth of the war was not enough; the people of Waterloo County had to create a myth of their own.

Few understood this better than William Henry Breithaupt. The *Peace Souvenir* was his idea, and he wrote its introduction: "The history of Waterloo County is a proud record of the loyalty of its inhabitants to the British Government and its institutions. In the Great War, 1914–1918, the County, without distinction of ancestry, whether Pennsylvanian, Scotch, English, Irish, German or other, responded freely and immediately to the call to arms."<sup>4</sup> Proclaiming the loyalty of Waterloo County was just part of the work that lay ahead. In the years following 1918, Breithaupt and a group of authors, politicians, and religious leaders nurtured a founding myth for Waterloo County, one that explained the county's German past in a way that would be acceptable within the prevailing memory of the war. Like so many other "founding myths," this one was not built on falsehoods; its purpose was to

convey the past “in a pure, unambiguous, and simple fashion.”<sup>5</sup> An impressive array of literary works, ceremonies, speeches, and memorials expressed a nostalgic yearning for a past that would provide lessons to a changing world and present the area’s German-speaking settlers, not as predecessors of the kaiser’s barbarism, but as symbols of a growing Canadian nation.

W.H. Breithaupt’s own memories reached back to the beginnings of Waterloo County. Born in New York State in 1857, Breithaupt was four years old when his German-born American father, Louis, expanded his tanning operations from Buffalo, New York, to Berlin, Canada West, Waterloo County’s political centre. Louis had married Catherine Hailer, the daughter of Jacob Hailer, a prominent business leader and one of Berlin’s first German immigrants. The Breithaupt family quickly became part of the area’s predominantly Germanic economic and political elite. When he died in 1880, Louis Breithaupt was the mayor of Berlin. His son (and William’s brother) Louis Jacob would later serve as mayor and member of the provincial legislature, beginning a tradition of family public service that would continue well into the present century.<sup>6</sup>

These families helped transform an area whose first settlers, German-speaking Mennonites, had trekked north from Pennsylvania after 1800. Until the War of 1812, the township of Waterloo was almost exclusively a Pennsylvania-Mennonite settlement. Through the next four decades, however, thousands of German-speaking settlers would arrive from Europe. Alsatian Amish would settle in Wilmot Township, to the west of Waterloo Township, in the 1820s. They would be joined by much larger numbers of German-speaking immigrants who, along with some Scots and English, would take up the rich lands in Waterloo, Woolwich, and Wellesley townships. When the tiny settlement of Berlin triumphed over its much larger rival, Galt, to become the seat of Waterloo County in



*As president of both the Waterloo Historical Society and The Ontario Historical Society, William Henry Breithaupt emphasized the loyalty of Waterloo County’s German-Canadian citizens during and after the First World War (photograph courtesy of the Waterloo Historical Society).*

1852, the area's political, economic, and cultural identity seemed tied to its German-speaking citizens whose religious and cultural ties were to Europe, not Pennsylvania. By 1871, Waterloo County's citizens were four times as likely to have been Lutherans or Catholics as Mennonites.<sup>7</sup>

It should not be surprising, then, that forces in Europe drove Waterloo County's early cultural identity. In the 1850s, immigrants to the county introduced the Turner movement, which had been born of an emerging Prussian nationalism early in the century. Using gymnastics and theatrics to nurture a Germanic identity among young people, the movement found a limited following in the county. Within a decade, however, *Turnverein* was on the decline; its cultish, anti-Catholic features made many suspicious, especially among the majority of the county's German immigrants who had migrated in a pre-nationalistic era.<sup>8</sup>

Events in Europe continued to fuel Waterloo County's growing reputation as a German cultural centre. On Tuesday, 2 May 1871, between 8,000 and 10,000 people gathered in the newly incorporated town of Berlin to celebrate *Friedensfest*, or the Peace Jubilee. A remarkable outpouring of emotion followed the news that the long-standing Franco-Prussian War had brought the French provinces of Alsace and Lorraine within the German federation. Local press reports described Berlin's *Friedensfest* as "one of the grandest and most successful public demonstrations ever held in Canada." A cannon firing at daybreak marked the dawn. The faithful gathered in early morning church services in Berlin and the nearby village of Waterloo. Afterwards, a German veteran led a band and twenty-four horsemen to the county courthouse where the crowds heard a bevy of speeches in German. Officials then planted a commemorative oak tree. The German societies that had gathered from across the province and the United States held up banners that proclaimed [in German], "Dead bodies we are if we hate, gods if we embrace lovingly"; "Hatred and revenge be forgotten, our mortal foes we forgive." Another illumination said simply: "Alsace and Lorraine." More speeches followed a series of dinners in Waterloo. Then, after seeing the trains off, the procession again converged on the courthouse where the crowds enjoyed a fireworks display.<sup>9</sup>

The *Friedensfest* was an important cultural milestone, for it permitted the county's German-speaking residents to nurture a German-Canadian identity in a way acceptable to all county residents. While *Turnverein* encouraged German national pride through physical exercise and theatrics, *Friedensfest* and the subsequent *Saengerfeste*, or song festivals, celebrated Germanic musical traditions. W.H. Breithaupt was a teenager when he attended the 1875 *Saengerfest*. He recalled years later that "great crowds," again estimated at 10,000, arrived at the Berlin train station and walked along King Street. Eleven evergreen arches along the route led to a quadruple arch at the town's centre. While fifteen choirs performed at an impressive auditorium in the town's west end, Berlin played host to a bevy of theatre performances, picnics, torchlight processions, and a ball.<sup>10</sup> *Saengerfest* was an extraordinary coup for Berlin. National newspapers reported widely on the event, and the *Canadian*



*Illustrated News* of Montreal published nationwide a series of illustrations from the festival. From 1874 to 1912, Berlin and Waterloo played host to nine *Saengerfeste*, making them one of the most prominent and enduring cultural symbols of Waterloo County.<sup>11</sup>

These celebrations were tied closely to the area's impressive economic success. In the 1890s Berlin surpassed Galt as the county's largest town. A "Made-in-Berlin" exhibition in 1905 celebrated Berlin's impressive growth.<sup>12</sup> In 1912 Berlin became Canada's eighteenth city. A commemorative book, *A Celebration of Cityhood*, explained that the new city's economic success was due not to its natural advantages, for it had few, but to its "frugal, industrious and enterprising population. These were almost wholly German or of German descent."<sup>13</sup>

Then came the First World War, and everything that had once defined Berlin and Waterloo County became marks of suspicion. In August 1914, just days after war was declared, vandals pulled a bust of Kaiser Wilhelm I from its pedestal in Berlin's Victoria Park. Installed in 1897 to commemorate Berlin's *Friedensfest*, the kaiser's bust was the first of many local German symbols that would come under attack in the next few years. Early in 1915, Berlin's manufacturers discovered that their "Made in Berlin" label was no longer an asset. Eager to attract wartime contracts, county manufacturers responded by creating a Waterloo County Export Association.<sup>14</sup> In March 1915 the Berlin school board ended its long-standing instruction in the German language. In short order, the area's German clubs closed their doors for the war's duration.

Some local residents spoke out against the wave of anti-German sentiment. In April 1915 "Joe Klotzkopp" wrote to the German-language *Ontario Glocke* and the *Berliner Journal*. Klotzkopp was the creation of Berlin newspaper editor John A. Rittinger, whose humorous German-language columns had poked gentle fun at Ontario's rural German life since 1895. Rittinger's column took a frustrated cut at the war: "When I reflect on it I am in fact amazed that not more of our younger fellows join the ranks to fight in Europe. Is there anything more beautiful in this world than to have yourself shot to death for the kings and emperors, or afterwards, when the war is over, to hobble around without an arm or leg, but with a silver medal on your chest?"<sup>15</sup> It was the last column that Rittinger would ever submit as Joe Klotzkopp.

With their German-language services, and strong ties with the neutral United States, the area's Lutheran churches inevitably became a focus of wartime suspicion. The Reverend C. Reinhold Tappert was doubly marked, for he was a Connecticut native who became the minister of Berlin's St Matthews Lutheran Church in 1912. Tappert and his parishioners proudly dedicated their impressive new church building in March 1915, the same month that an anti-German propagandist renewed his attacks in the local press. In a year in which Canadians recoiled from propaganda stories of Canadian soldiers crucified by German captors, vicious gas attacks, and the German sinking of an unarmed passenger ship, the

*Lusitania*, Tappert's public defence of his Germanic background only fanned the flames of suspicion that others in the county were trying so hard to extinguish.<sup>16</sup>

Amidst these growing pressures came local residents determined to demonstrate their loyalty to the Allied cause. There was no better opportunity than in September 1915, when the federal minister of munitions and defence, Sam Hughes, visited the area. Some local leaders convinced Hughes that, despite heavy recruiting early in the war, Waterloo County could still raise two battalions for overseas service. Galt became the recruiting centre for the 111th Battalion, Canadian Expeditionary Force (CEF); Berlin became home to the 118th Battalion, CEF. The year ended with the two cities desperately competing for recruits.

Grim war news only deepened local tensions in 1916. Prime Minister Robert Borden announced in January that Canada would double its overseas commitment. On 3 February a suspicious fire destroyed the Parliament buildings in Ottawa. Arson was suspected. In this atmosphere came a further test of loyalty. On 11 February a public meeting at the Berlin city hall resolved to change the name of the city. The resolution began: "Whereas it would appear that a strong prejudice has been created throughout the British Empire against the name 'Berlin' and all that the name implies ..."<sup>17</sup>

Through all of this, the Breithaupt family watched with growing concern. L.J. Breithaupt noted in early February 1916: "Public sentiment in Canada is very anti-German & so to some extent against anything connected with or reminding one of Germany."<sup>18</sup> William Breithaupt shared his brother's unease. Both were well travelled, but William had lived and worked in the United States for many years as a bridge engineer. When he returned to his boyhood home around 1900, he had invested not only in a local street railway but also in the area's cultural life. He headed Berlin's library board and was the first president of the Waterloo Historical Society, which he helped organize in November 1912. During the society's third annual meeting in late 1915, Breithaupt talked about the war ("the great overmastering event in the world's history") and emphasized the area's loyalty: "Notwithstanding descent of many of us from a country and people now hostile, we refuse to stand second, in loyalty and sacrifice, to any part of the British Dominions."<sup>19</sup> To this end, W.H. Breithaupt quietly began collecting photographs and war-related memorabilia. In his society's annual volumes, Breithaupt started to list the names and photographs of county men who had enlisted and fallen.

Loyalty was one thing, but it was too much for the Breithaupts to see their city's name changed without a formal debate. In a letter to Berlin's *News Record* on 26 February 1916, W.H. queried: "Is anything to be gained by dropping the venerable name of Berlin, Ontario? Will it make any difference whatever in the cause now most important and most compelling of all, that of British success in the war?" For him, the "practical duty" was to raise the local battalion "to full strength as quickly as possible." At the very least, Breithaupt argued, the proposal to change Berlin's name should be put to a popular vote.<sup>20</sup>

Breithaupt was thoroughly denounced for his trouble. One detractor replied: "One grows tired of hearing people continually harp upon what the Germans have done for Berlin and Waterloo County. They came from Germany to a veritable garden at an opportune time and prospered. Might one not well ask now whether they did not owe as much to Waterloo County as the County owed to them? ... the present is not the time to deal in quibbles as to whether Berlin was built up by Germans, by English, Irish, Canadians or the Breithaupts."<sup>21</sup>

This sort of thinly veiled threat worked well in the campaign to change the city's name. So did outright violence. On 5 March 1916, soldiers training in the city assaulted the Reverend Tappert in his Berlin home after he had failed to heed demands to leave the country. Soon after, a meeting of local manufacturers and businessmen urged the name change and threatened a boycott of those who opposed it.<sup>22</sup> As a fierce and divisive name-change campaign began in early May, soldiers broke into the Acadian Club, one of the German clubs closed at the start of the war, and ransacked its contents. W.H. Breithaupt received threatening letters and his phone lines were cut in the days before the vote.<sup>23</sup> Some 3,057 city ratepayers cast their ballots on 19 May 1916. Those in favour of changing the name narrowly won the day by eighty-one votes.<sup>24</sup>

Equally nasty was the second vote on 24 June in which voters chose the city's new name. Only 892 voters marked a ballot that included Brock, Adanac (Canada spelled backwards), Benton, Corona, Keowana, and Kitchener. Critics from outside the county thought it in poor taste to include the name of the recently deceased British secretary of state for war, Lord Kitchener, who had gone down with a British warship on 5 June. Nevertheless, the name appealed to 346 voters. Said the *News Record* after the ballots were counted: "The outstanding feature was the absolute indifference displayed by the ratepayers."<sup>25</sup> Berlin became Kitchener on 1 September 1916.

The final years of the war brought only more controversy to Waterloo County. In January 1917 troops were dispatched to Kitchener to quell angry crowds protesting the election of a mayor and council who opposed the city's new name.<sup>26</sup> In November, Prime Minister Borden was shouted down during a campaign stop in the city. City council later apologized for the incident, but the voters of North Waterloo defied Borden, electing William Dahm Euler, a local businessman who ran as a Laurier Liberal opposed to conscription. Euler's stand came at a price. In 1919 a group of veterans tried to force him to kiss the Union Jack. Euler refused, maintaining bravely that it would be sullied under the circumstances. He was beaten up for his trouble, but Euler later served in Mackenzie King's cabinet before he became a senator in 1940.<sup>27</sup>

The "Battle for Berlin, Ontario" is a familiar story, but far less is known of the ways in which W.H. Breithaupt and others sought to reclaim and transform the county's German identity. At a time when it was no longer possible to be loyal to both Germany and Canada, the area's Pennsylvania-German and Swiss-German roots offered a more acceptable German identity to celebrate, one based not on "Busy Berlin" but on the trek of the Conestoga.

With the war over, W.H. Breithaupt's first task was to simplify and purify the divisive events of which he had been a part. His *Peace Souvenir* served that purpose: "There was no thought [in the county] of conscientious objection by Mennonites or anyone." Of course there was, but this was not a point that could be understood within the emerging myth of the war. The memory of Private Ralph Alexander Eby was especially important to Breithaupt. He included the young private's picture in his society's journal when Eby was killed in 1915, and remembered him as the great-great-grandson of Pennsylvania-born Mennonite bishop Benjamin Eby, a founder of Berlin. In 1919 Breithaupt referred to Ralph Eby as the first "Waterloo County man to be killed in action."<sup>28</sup> It mattered little that Ralph Eby grew up and enlisted in Saskatchewan.

William Breithaupt's position within the province's historical movement proved an important asset in placing Waterloo County's past within the accepted history of Canada. In 1919 the chairman of the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada, Brigadier-General Ernest Cruikshank, enquired of Breithaupt if anything in Waterloo County was worthy of a national monument. Within three years, and with the influence of county native and prime minister Mackenzie King, the board endorsed a pioneer memorial.<sup>29</sup> Ernest Cruikshank became president of The Ontario Historical Society (OHS) in 1920, Breithaupt in 1924.<sup>30</sup>

Breithaupt's two-year term coincided with the retelling of the story of Waterloo County. In June 1924 the provincial historical society held its annual meeting at the new Pioneer Memorial Park in Waterloo County, where Breithaupt and members of the Waterloo County Pioneers Memorial Association had purchased late in 1923 one acre of land overlooking the Grand River. The price was seventy dollars, which Breithaupt thought "was reasonable enough." The plot contained a small cemetery where were laid the remains of the Betzner family settlers, some of the first Pennsylvania-born settlers to the area.<sup>31</sup> Breithaupt invited several speakers to comment on the significance of the site. Brigadier Cruikshank used the opportunity to announce that the federal government would recognize the site with a historic plaque. Construction of a pioneer memorial tower – financed by local subscription – would begin soon after.

In the meantime, popular writing about Waterloo County and its history found a wide audience. *Mer Douce*, a magazine devoted to the "Story of Ontario," issued a special Waterloo County edition in June 1924.<sup>32</sup> The magazine reflected Breithaupt's earlier work on the county, including a piece he published in the OHS's *Papers and Records* in 1919. Two more of Breithaupt's articles appeared in the journal, in 1924 and 1926. They gave an important legitimacy to the area's past, but it was a local librarian and author, Mabel Dunham, who emerged as the county's most important writer. In 1924 Macmillan of Canada published Dunham's first and best-known book, *The Trail of the Conestoga*. Born in Wellington County in 1881, Dunham grew up in Berlin and taught there briefly before earning a bachelor's degree from the University of Toronto in 1908. A person of no small



achievements, Dunham became one of Canada's first female librarians at the Berlin (later Kitchener) Public Library. In 1922 she founded the local chapter of the Canadian Federation of University Women. Few authors can boast that a sitting prime minister penned the forward to their first edition.

With its epic story line and folksy Pennsylvania-Dutch idioms, *The Trail of the Conestoga* remains an enduring piece of early literary Canadiana. Dunham's story begins in 1793 in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, where an aging Mennonite dreams of a new start in Canada. For Christian Eby, Canada was "a magic word" where "... the shackles of slaves were broken, and there men might live unmolested according to the dictates of their consciences. Englishmen had befriended the Mennonites in the past; would do so again in the future."<sup>33</sup>

Pennsylvania held few prospects for Christian's niece, Beccy Eby, and her future husband, Sam Bricker, so the challenge of a new land proved irresistible. Sam first journeyed north in 1803 with his brother's family, crossing the Alleghenies and braving bear attacks, unfriendly travellers, and "the River of Death," the Niagara. "On the farther shore they saw Canada, the land of their dreams."<sup>34</sup> At a Mennonite community in the Niagara peninsula, the Brickers learned of a tract of land owned by Robert Heasley, a wealthy Member of Parliament from "the Head of the Lake." Several Mennonite families had already purchased deeds from Heasley and settled on the banks of the Grand River. The two Brickers enthusiastically followed suit.

The story then turns to treachery and deceit, for Sam Bricker soon discovered through a chance meeting in York that Robert Heasley did not own the tract outright; the deeds he sold were worthless. In Dunham's work, Sam Bricker confronted Heasley about the outstanding mortgage before the young Mennonite returned to Pennsylvania to find the required cash. On his return to Upper Canada, Sam Bricker brought Beccy, as well as the money raised by his Pennsylvania brethren that would retire the debt on the lands.

The book's final chapters begin, significantly, at the outbreak of the War of 1812, when the loyalties of this growing Mennonite community were again challenged. In a dramatic turn, Sam Bricker risked banishment to seek revenge on Heasley, journeying through the war-torn province in search of justice. His wanderings almost cost him his life, but he returned home, to Beccy, their children, and his extended community, his *freundschaft*. The book ends in 1815 when Sam Bricker discovered from a passing soldier that the war had settled nothing. The two debate the Mennonites' stand on war, as they had earlier, but neither can convince the other of his views. The discussion ends amicably, when Sam invites the soldier into his small cabin to share the Brickers' hospitality.

The book held a special resonance in Waterloo County, for the story it depicted was useful on many levels. Dunham's local audience would have delighted in seeing so many local family names that were still prominent over a century later: Clemens, Eby, Erb, Brubacher, Betzner, Bricker. These characters and Dunham's close knowledge of local



*Kitchener librarian, historian, and author Mabel Dunham whose most famous book, *The Trail of the Conestoga* (1924) helped to convey a more acceptable German-Canadian identity for Waterloo County (photograph courtesy of the Waterloo County Hall of Fame).*

Creek provided meaningful symbols around which the fighting in France and Belgium could be understood.<sup>37</sup> For Canadians, the figure of Brock embodied loyalty and courage; for Sam Bricker, Brock further symbolized British justice and honour. The recurring figure of the soldier in Dunham's work is also revealing, for though he does not agree with Sam's views of war and peace, he at least gives them a grudging respect. The soldier appears at book's end with news that the British would compensate for their losses those Mennonites who had been conscripted as teamsters in 1813. The War of 1812 had allowed Pennsylvania Germans to reconcile their loyalty and religious faith; if only the First World War had been so simple.

*The Trail of the Conestoga* formed an imaginary tapestry for the Pioneer Memorial Tower when it opened in 1926. On a fine, sunny day in late August, an estimated 2,000 people

history<sup>35</sup> provided her readers with the sense that this was a work based on fact. Further, Dunham's blending of fact and fiction was especially suited to the time in which she was writing. Many of her audience would have known the general outline of her story, for it was part of the Mennonites' oral tradition. Robert Heasley was based on Richard Beasley, whose holdings in the Beasley Tract became the land on which the story's hero, the real Sam Bricker, settled in 1803. Bricker did return to Pennsylvania to raise the money needed to retire Beasley's debts on the land, and although recent scholarship suggests that perhaps Beasley was not the scoundrel described by Dunham,<sup>36</sup> he was an easy target and Dunham did not spare him. It was a small leap to see in Heasley (or Beasley) the same villainy and abuse of power that had so confounded Waterloo County and its German identity after 1914.

The War of 1812 also offered Dunham a direct parallel to the emerging memory of the First World War. Jonathan Vance has illustrated how General Brock and the battles of Queenston Heights and Stoney

came out to see the tower's official dedication. It was a formal occasion: men and boys wore suits and straw hats; women wore the long, draped dresses so popular at the time. There was "ample parking space for motor cars,"<sup>38</sup> but this was a trip anchored firmly in the past.

"This tower of stones erected by you to honour your pioneers of this county will tell the story to unborn generations when they ask 'What mean these stones?'" So declared the keynote speaker, A.G. Seyfert, of Lancaster, Pennsylvania. Beside the tower's entrance was a plaque by the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada:

In the spring of 1800 Joseph Schoerg and Samuel Betzner, Jr., brothers-in-law, Mennonites, from Franklin County, Pennsylvania, began the first two farms in the County of Waterloo; Schoerg on land adjoining this farm, Betzner on the west bank of the river three miles down-stream.

In the same year came Samuel Betzner, Sr., who took up a farm including this site.

Other settlers followed suit and in 1805 a company formed in Pennsylvania purchased sixty thousand acres, the German Company Tract, comprising the greater part of Block 2, Grand River Indian Lands, now Waterloo Township. This constituted the first large settlement in the then far interior of Upper Canada.

Atop the tower's spire was fixed a three-foot copper weather vane depicting a Waterloo County icon: a Conestoga wagon, drawn by four horses.

The tower's most prominent feature – a copper-sheathed spire with a distinctive Swiss design – gave a simple answer to the pressing matter of the pioneers' origins. Most of the speakers that day avoided referring to the pioneers' German origins or language, preferring instead to praise their Swiss or Pennsylvanian roots. Not everyone followed suit. W.H. Breithaupt was eager to bring his own family within the tower's shadow, so he argued that it honoured "both the Pennsylvanians who came first and the later comers from Germany." Though M.G. Sherk referred to the "Pennsylvania-Dutch" throughout his talk, he argued that the term was misleading: "Since the Great War, in which they were true and loyal, if we judge by the number of their sons they sent to the front, there are those who would argue that they are not German but Dutch. They apparently are not aware that most of their forefathers came from German states and German cantons of Switzerland."<sup>39</sup> Neither man, however, could overcome the tower's imposing symbolism; henceforth, the monument would be known commonly as the "Swiss Tower."

An equally important message that day was to affirm the place of the county's pioneers within the origins of Canada. That task fell to the provincial minister of agriculture, John Martin, himself of Pennsylvania-German background. As he unveiled the plaque at the

tower's base, Martin noted that "we often hear the expression 'The builders of Canada,' referring to the statesmen who laid the foundations of Government. All glory to them; they have done their work and they have done it well, but let us not forget the men and women who left their homes in other lands to come to Canada. They were just as truly entitled to the name 'builders of Canada.'"<sup>40</sup> Of their loyalty to Britain, the minister added, there was little doubt. These reassuring words struck at the central problem that Waterloo County's citizens had faced since 1914: the memory of a war that had little place for ethnic groups generally and Germans specifically.<sup>41</sup> On this day, men in high places declared publicly that the county's German-speaking pioneers had played their part at the very start of the Dominion.

If the pioneers were nation-builders, then it followed that they embodied the idealized virtues of the nation. They were "honest, steadfast and secure," said one. Others lauded their "industry and thrift. They believed in and practised the gospel of hard work." They also loved "peace and order." Central to these "splendid virtues and good qualities" was the faith of the pioneer, a notion that gave a prominent position to the county's Mennonites. Mennonite Bishop S. Frederick Coffman stated simply that "heroism is the chief characteristic of the pioneer. The effort put forth by those who established these homes and whose memory to-day is honoured, resulted in more than the conquest of the forces of nature, of natural barriers and wilds of country; theirs was a conquest of spirit and soul – a conquest of faith."<sup>42</sup>

Bishops Coffman of Vineland and Clayton Derstine of Kitchener were the only religious leaders to speak at the tower's dedication. Their attendance raised questions for some, for not only did they represent less than 10 per cent of Waterloo County's population,<sup>43</sup> the two also faced criticism that the very idea of a memorial honouring the Mennonites reflected an ostentation that the faith rejected. Still, the event came at a significant time in the life of the local Mennonite congregations. In 1924, just as the ground was being broken for the memorial, the first influx of Mennonite refugees from the Soviet Union stepped from a train in the town of Waterloo.<sup>44</sup> The arrival of over 1,000 Russian Mennonites through the year forged a united response at a time when the county's oldest Mennonite congregation faced a serious division: a dispute over whether to extend communion to women who did not wear head coverings had just led a third of the congregation, representing its liberal wing, to defect when its position on the issue was rejected.<sup>45</sup> In these circumstances, it was not surprising that bishops Coffman and Derstine, both fundamentalists, used the memorial dedication in 1926 to affirm the basic tenets of their faith. They chose a good opportunity, for the event anchored several features of the Mennonite experience firmly in the popular mind. The loyalty of the Mennonites, their heroism in facing the dangers of the journey to Upper Canada, their love of farming and nature, their friendships with native



peoples, all of these idealized notions became accepted forms of the Mennonite experience. Only very recently have they come under more critical scrutiny.<sup>46</sup>

The celebration of the pioneers in 1926 also held more secular lessons, as speaker after speaker tied the pioneers' faith and toil to the county's agricultural and industrial success. The Honourable John Martin made the clearest connection between the past and present:

They settled in what was then a forest wilderness. They built log cabins, they cut down the trees, and cleared up the land. They helped to build our towns and cities and found our industries. To-day we see the fruition of their labours. Nowhere in the Dominion of Canada is there a more prosperous agricultural county than the County of Waterloo, and nowhere do we find a finer industrial development than right here in this county. Furthermore, nowhere in Canada do we see a finer demonstration of the fact that agricultural prosperity and industrial prosperity should go hand in hand.<sup>47</sup>

Martin tried to avoid mentioning the inevitable tensions between the town and countryside, but that was a trick. The minister later remarked that among the pioneers' "distinguishing characteristics" was "their love of the soil. They cared nothing for cities." County native M.G. Sherk also stumbled on the pioneers' legacy. He observed that their "virtues and good qualities ... have helped to make the County of Waterloo, with its industrial centres, the banner county of the province – at least agriculturally – and have helped Ontario to become the premier province of the Dominion in agricultural and industrial activity."<sup>48</sup>

It was difficult to reconcile the county's industry with its rural origins unless one saw the image of the rural pioneer as a way to offset the county's urban progress. This trend was not unique: while Britons witnessed a transformation of their country's economic and social landscape through these years, many writers were busy sketching utopian portraits of country life.<sup>49</sup> So it was in Waterloo County, where the pioneers' romantic, anti-modern ethos helped cushion a rapid advance into the urban and industrial world. How else can one explain that, when W.H. Breithaupt introduced Waterloo County in Middleton and Landon's *History of Ontario* in 1927, he described it as "primarily an agricultural county; a region of fine, prosperous farmsteads." By his own figures, over 70 per cent of the county area's citizens were then living in its cities and towns.<sup>50</sup>

The pace of change within the county only brought a greater yearning for an earlier, simpler time. Elliot McLoughry was appointed as the province's agricultural representative to the county in 1924. As he travelled along the county's back concessions, he kept careful record of the impact of automobiles, hydro lines, radios, and factory wages. In 1929 he reported to his superiors: "The fact that farmers not only work together much less than formerly and that they look more to the towns than their own neighbourhood for recreation,

makes the present day farm life much less interesting socially than in pioneer times." That year he began his annual report with a poem, *Our Pioneers*:

Now watch these empire builders move,  
see what things they dearly love,  
Observe what massive stones they bring  
What sure cement and fastening;  
How deep they lay, how strong they bind!  
With what a hand, with what a mind  
How well they plan, how well they do,  
How old their work, and yet how new!  
What strength of proud historic worth!  
What vigor of more modern birth!  
Together building Freedom's throne; –  
And right secure to every one.  
A home for Order, Justice, Peace,  
And Reason's sway, till Time shall cease.<sup>51</sup>

McLoughry's poetic expressions speak to the nostalgic, aesthetic qualities of Waterloo County's past. Perhaps he found inspiration in the pioneer tower, which its builders created as a tool of the imagination. W.H. Breithaupt noted that it contained reference points to the north star and, to the south, towards Pennsylvania. As he instructed his audience in 1926, "if therefore you stand on the platform directly over the portal with your back square to the opposite angle of the hexagon you can imagine you see those two pioneers setting out on their adventurous journey so fraught with importance to history."<sup>52</sup>

A nostalgic return to earlier times was important to the Waterloo County myth, just as it was for those creating a collective memory throughout North America. In the United States at this time, Henry Ford and John D. Rockefeller, Jr, were spending millions recreating pre-capitalist utopias, Ford at Greenfield Village, Michigan, Rockefeller at Williamsburg, Virginia.<sup>53</sup> In Canada, a fascination with rural life sent many collectors searching Nova Scotia's outports for "the folk," farmers and fishermen who had nurtured a "distinctive culture" apart from modern life.<sup>54</sup> As Ontario's road systems opened up for the motoring tourist, those searching for the nostalgic past could easily discover Waterloo County's "folk."

Katherine Hale was a fitting guide for the visitor to the mythical Waterloo County. The daughter of a prominent Galt family, she had sung professionally in New York and been a staff writer at the Toronto *Mail and Empire* before she took up travel writing. In 1937 the Ryerson Press published Hale's *This Is Ontario*. Intended for a cultured and wealthy audience, the book was a pleasant motoring guide of the province's more interesting

tourist sites. Her account of the Grand River valley began in Galt, but her home town did not inspire the same leaps of imagination as the “Swiss Tower,” which provided “the keynote to the surrounding towns of German settlement.” Hale and her companions spent their first day as modern-day explorers, seeking the source of the Grand River. As night fell, the party returned to Waterloo County and dined on the “best of German food.” The group also chatted with an artist who had followed painter Charles MacDonal Manly into the small settlement of Conestogo.<sup>55</sup> Hale suggested to her acquaintance that the local artistic community “get together and do a Conestogo mural.” Hale’s party then drove south to Preston. In the twilight, the smells of sulphur, yeast, and beer recalled memories of a picnic tea Hale had once enjoyed in the town’s Kress Hotel, where sulphur baths enticed wealthy patrons. “A German waiter in a white apron had brought foaming glasses of ale out to the grown-up members of the party. But the tame coon, tied by an iron chain to the sulphur fountain, had been our great excitement ... I was seven years old.”

Inspired by her childhood memories, and the tales of Mabel Dunham, Hale spent the second day of her journey in search of more local nostalgia and German culture. She visited Doon and the studios of the county’s most famous painter, Homer Watson, who died in 1936. His area landscapes of old mills, churning rivers, and thick oaks long provided the most powerful visual rendition of the mythical Waterloo County. Then it was on to Kitchener which, Hale noted, was once called Berlin: “But it never had a tinge of Prussianism in its blood.” Its first settlers, she observes incorrectly, were “up from Philadelphia, in Conestoga wagons so heavily loaded that the women had to walk part of the way.”

Like any modern tourist, Hale ventured into the surrounding countryside where “something of tradition still lingers.” Here she encountered the “folk,” the rural Old Order Mennonites who “furnish an entirely Ontario-German air.” Her party stopped at a Mennonite meeting house, where they gawked at the gravestones which, she noted with no intended irony, are “as regular in line as a regiment of soldiers.” In the settlement of St Jacobs in Woolwich Township, Hale wondered if Conestoga wagons were still being built locally. Directed to “a group of ancients,” she recorded something of their Pennsylvania-German dialect in answer: “After a long pause one of them replied, ‘Ja – there would be wagons!’” Her adventure over, Hale ended the day in a Toronto concert hall. As she emerged on Bloor Street “with street cars and motors thundering by,” Hale was again transported to another place and time, thinking that “the sound of a river is the best of all music on a summer night, and that no other air – except perhaps that of the far north – compares with the air of our valley.”<sup>56</sup>

Hale’s search for cultural authenticity recalls Ian McKay’s folklorists and tourists who were then exploring rural Nova Scotia. It is unlikely that Breithaupt and Dunham anticipated the commercial possibilities offered by “The Trail of the Conestoga.” Their purpose merely was to simplify the past so they could make sense of their own times. To quote Malcolm Chase and Christopher Shaw on the invention of tradition, Breithaupt and Dunham sought

“to provide a series of not wholly untrue stories about the past which defused tensions in the present or which cemented the link between the individual and the collectivity.”<sup>57</sup>

Who could blame them? Both Breithaupt and Dunham had grown up within an unusually rich cultural tradition that had suddenly come apart during the First World War. The economic and social change that followed only separated them further from a past that was well within their memory. What better way to find meaning in their lives than to idealize the past and to imagine the simple challenges the pioneers had overcome?

No one was more taken by the mythical idea of Waterloo County than David Panabaker. He, too, was a Waterloo County native, the second youngest of fourteen children born to David and Leah Panabaker on their farm north of Hespeler. His great-grandfather was Cornelius Pannebecker, who arrived from Montgomery County, Pennsylvania, in 1810. Panabaker reflected the central paradoxes of Waterloo County. Though of Mennonite background, he was a member of the newly formed United Church. Panabaker had long left the farm for a successful career in local business and politics. Rising to the position of general manager of the Forbes textile mill in Hespeler, Panabaker also became the county warden in 1919 and later the mayor of Hespeler.

Local history offered David Panabaker a relief from the pace of modern life. He assumed the presidency of the Waterloo Historical Society from W.H. Breithaupt; he also headed the Pioneer Tower Memorial Association. Panabaker spoke to countless groups through these years – from Rotary clubs to women’s institutes – stressing how the Pennsylvania-German settler provided a meaningful figure for the times. As Loyalists, the Pennsylvania Germans had helped build a Dominion that celebrated its sixtieth birthday in 1927. As farmers, they reminded an increasingly urban society of its simpler, rural past. Their qualities of thrift and hard work offered a bulwark against difficult economic times. As pacifists, the Mennonites even gave the county “a somewhat direct point of contact” to international efforts to avoid war.<sup>58</sup> These ideals comforted Panabaker after he left his job and his health began to fail. Panabaker spent more and more time at the memorial tower in his final years. On the evening of 2 August 1939, he fell from its balcony and died.<sup>59</sup> Five weeks later, Canada was at war with Germany.

In January 1944, William Henry Breithaupt died. He was eighty-seven. His obituary in the Waterloo Historical Society’s journal would have pleased him, for it appeared amidst the casualty lists of local men. Much had changed since he had started the practice in 1915. There were now few of the ethnic divisions that Waterloo County had faced a generation before.

Both Breithaupt and Panabaker could take some credit for this. In the face of a collective memory of the First World War that had demonized Germany and things German, they had fostered a more innocuous form of German-Canadian identity that fit into a growing Canadian national idea. Through books, speeches, talks, and public commemorations, this simple



version of the county's origins was welcomed by a wide range of people: members of the founding families, religious leaders, business people, and politicians. Whether this history was "correct" was less relevant than the perspective and meaning it offered against the divisions and changes of the world after 1918.

The myth was no less useful after 1945. Faced with a growing bevy of political divisions, Waterloo County council stretched the region's founding myth to an extraordinary length to celebrate the county's centennial in 1952. When a council committee discovered that the county's political origins in 1852 echoed the problems of the 1950s, its members decided to reach back even farther and re-enact the trek of the first settlers from Pennsylvania to Waterloo. Mabel Dunham's *The Trail of the Conestoga* was reprinted in 1942 and provided a suitable guide.

In the hands of the committee, however, even the myth's more accurate aspects were lost in the excitement. Just weeks before the trek was to begin, a suitable (but not authentic) Conestoga wagon was secured, and a team left Lancaster, Pennsylvania, in June 1952. A truck advertising the centennial followed the caravan throughout. Cars were stopped on the bridge at Niagara Falls to let the horses and wagon pass. As the trekkers reached the county town of Preston, the town council and a group of young boys dressed as Indians "attacked" the trekkers. After stopping at the Pioneer Tower, the team continued on to Kitchener, where it drove past the home of Mabel Dunham, the centenary's honorary historian.

The end of the trek in the city of Waterloo's park marked the opening of "a dramatic outdoor spectacle." A Toronto theatre producer had transformed Mabel Dunham's book into a musical, "an epic story of Waterloo County ... as told through Music, Drama, and the Ballet." A cast of 600 was accompanied by the K-W Symphony Orchestra, which began with a medley of Canadian airs. The Waterloo County Centennial Choir sang throughout the seven sequences: "The trail is blazed, the horizon widens, the settlements flourish, the trails converge, the county prospers, the county struggles and the trail continues." As farm animals were paraded across the stage, the narrator declared: "This is the great new Elizabethan age ... an age to be made glorious by the courage, imagination & spiritual strength of our great Commonwealth of Free Nations. Our tale is told. God Save the Queen."<sup>60</sup> Waterloo County's founding myth was confirmed.

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  - 22 L.J. Breithaupt diaries, 9 March 1916; *Berlin News Record*, 9 March 1916; Hayes, *Waterloo County*, 120, 121.
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