

Early Settlers

The first settler in the Utopia area was Mr. Eugene Smith, great-grandfather of the present Mr. Eugene Smith from Utopia. He came from Ireland to Barrie in 1830 where he settled at Little Lake, just north of Barrie, which, at that time, consisted of only two houses. Later, in 1845, Mr. Smith moved to the hamlet of Utopia, which he is said to have named.³ He settled on Lot 31, Concession 6 of Essa Township, on the Sunnidale Road, where he built a house and had a farm. On it, he established a tavern and stopover which became the most important hostelry between Toronto and Collingwood during the 1853 construction of the North-Western Railway from Allandale to Collingwood. Cost of a bed at this time was 5 cents a night, and no charge was made for spending the night before the open fireplace in the kitchen. Mr. Smith had attended university in Dublin and had a degree in mineralogy, astronomy, and chemistry. For many years, he was secretary-treasurer of the local school board, and became known as the "Old Oak Tree of Utopia". His first wife, Sarah Free, who he married in 1838, and two of their children died of diphtheria. He was married again in 1853 to a young woman named Bridget Keating. Mr. Smith himself, though, lived up to his nickname; he died in 1908 at the age of 104.⁴

Utopia's second settlers were Mr. and Mrs. John Jennett, who walked from Toronto to Ivy in four days. They stayed for a time in Ivy, before setting in Utopia. They lived on a farm where St. George's Anglican Church now stands; it was in fact, the Jennetts who donated the property for the church.⁵

Most of the settlers who arrived in Utopia in the 1850's and 1860's were from the south. This generation of people were reputedly heavy drinkers; liquor was a necessity in their lives. It is said that if the men were in the midst of a barn raising and they found that there was no liquor available, they would immediately quit until someone rode to Angus and returned with a bottle. Once the spirits were provided, everyone would go happily back to work. The following generation is said to have drunk very little however; Utopia had changed somewhat from its pioneer beginnings.⁵⁶

By 1872-73 Utopia was a thriving little centre. Its population consisted of, among others, a blacksmith, hotel keeper, teacher, grist and sawmillers, tailor, millwright, and merchant.⁷ The largest percentage of the populous, however, still remains farmers. They were the cause

and consumers that permitted the businesses of Utopia, especially the mills, to flourish.