

Entertainment in Utopia

In its past, Utopia was an interesting place to live or visit, as there was something happening almost every week to amuse the inhabitants.

Utopia was not a dull place to live or visit. Practically every week there was something happening to amuse the dwellers.

Of the many activities, one was the box social, where the community would group together and enjoy a Sunday afternoon. The box lunches would be decorated with fancy paper and colourful ribbons to bring in the highest bid. Throughout the week there would be card parties, especially among the elderly, and often dances on Saturday nights. In the winter, the younger ones took pleasure in skating on the mill pond, where the boys were usually able to get a game of hockey rounded up. Every year, a strawberry festival and fowl supper were put on by the church women, drawing people from miles away.

Annually, the schools of Essa Township would join together for a fall fair. School No. 9 of Utopia always participated in this event. The children would show the livestock they raised and the plants they grew, as well as taking part in a parade where they would march in competition.

After radio had been introduced, the adults of Utopia would get together to listen to the weekly radio show, "Farm Forum" which would give ideas for community improvement. A discussion usually ensued. The Utopia Community Park, opened on August 27, 1947, and the Utopia Community Centre, built in 1955 and officially opened in 1956, are two results of the "Farm Forum" broadcasts. The people of Utopia would also raise money by euchre parties, investing the proceeds in victory bonds. All of these organizations provided a lot of fun and fellowship for the hamlet's people.

Today, Utopia still maintains much of this early spirit. The following was written by Mrs. Vera Miller for the Alliston Herald in February of 1978, and serves to describe some of the happenings of Utopia:

"For over 25 years, euchre parties have been held during the winter on Thursday nights. We have several dances each year and have been privileged to help celebrate several Golden Weddings; some forties; and both churches' one hundredth anniversaries; also one ninetieth birthday party.

In June each year, ask almost anyone and they will tell you they are winding their way to the annual Strawberry Festival. Over 400 folks are served by the congregation of the Anglican Church.

We also hold Parents-Supervised Teen Dances with an attendance of 80 or more during the winter, and in summer, our well-cared for ball park is very much alive with several squirt, pee-wee, bantam and girls' ball teams.

We also have a well supervised Conservation Area with pavilion and plenty of parking and camping space, and a fishing and swimming area.

Utopia has been, and still is a "community" in the most complete sense of the word."

The former Mr. McMaster homestead at Lot 29, Concession 7, is now a beautiful 18 hole golf course named Royal Downs. A tennis court is connected with this golf course.

Richard Bell & family

Richard Bell was born on October 6, 1854 in Honeywood, Mulmur Township. At the age of fifteen, he went to learn the milling trade at Dunedin, Township of Nottawasaga. It was not until 1876 when Richard Bell came to Essa Township. He began working at Utopia Grist Mill under Mr. James Spink. Richard took up residence on Lot #30, Concession 6 at Utopia.

In 1879, Mr. Richard Bell and Miss Sarah Sproule were united in holy wedlock. Sarah was raised in Utopia, just south of the mill. She had one sister and two brothers. The sister's name was Mary Jane. Mary Jane later married William McMaster. In 1900 the couple moved to Cookstown to farm. They raised a family of four boys and three girls. One brother went west and the other brother farmed in Utopia. Sarah raised six children, five sons and a daughter. The children names were William M. Bell, John A. Bell, J. Harold Bell, Jas. E. Bell, Roy G. Bell and Vera Bell.

Richard had two brothers and two sisters. Liz was one sister who resided in Creemore and the other sister moved to Midland. His brothers were John and Manuel. Manuel worked at the mill for a few years and then later operated the Post Office in the hamlet. Manuel and Hannah raised a family of eight. The other brother, John, also worked at the mill. John married a young woman named Minnie Lawrence of Creemore. After leaving the mill, John and Minnie went to Toronto, where they opened a variety store. John couldn't get around too much because of his disabled leg. The two were laid to rest in the Honeywood Cemetary (sp).

Richard Bell was devoted member of the L.O.L. No. 450, Ivy. Bell belonged to this organization for sixty-four years. He was also a member of the Corinthian Lodge, A.F. & A.M. in Barrie for many years. Richard Bell never said a word against anyone and was well spoke of. R. Bell was a very honest man; a man with respect. Aside from working at the mill continuously, he was into politics. He was involved with the council for twenty-seven years. His son, Harold, followed his father's footprints. Harold was treasurer of Essa Township for thirty-eight years. Harold, also continued the milling trade for many years.

It was the year 1929, when Richard Bell became ill and was forced to retire from the milling trade. On Sunday, March 7, 1937 Richard Bell died at his home in Utopia. Seven years later, Sarah Bell (Sproule) passed on.

The Township of Essa Salutes Richard Bell

In 1909 at a County Council session, Councillor Garden presented Richard Bell with an engraved gold watch symbolizing the gratitude of fellow members. (The Northern Advance, March 18, 1937, p.4, c.2)

Richard Bell served on the Essa Township Council for twenty-seven years continuously. From about 1886 to 1892 he was a Councillor, then the following three years Richard Bell was elected the Deputy Reeve. During the years 1897-1913 he held the position of Reeve of Essa Township. (The Northern Advance, October 28, 1909)

Bell was elected Warden of Simcoe County by acclamation on January 26, 1909.

Richard was quite an active member of the Council. He appeared enthusiastic and always ready to lend a helping hand. It was said "Richard Bell was the oldest and most respected citizen of Essa Township". ((The Northern Advance, January 28, 1909, Vol. #4)