No Claim to Greatness but that which comes from a Job Well Done: The Pioneer Myth in a Rural Ontario Town

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April 21, 2010
I know a dear place, which I shall describe,
On the banks of a river, with lakes close beside
With clear sparkling waters, and fishing galore
I know the best haunts, I’ve been there before

They are rugged and honest, kind hearted and true,
Their virtues outstanding, with faults just a few,
I’ve seen other places, big, famous and grand,
In my humble opinion, it is God’s promised land

- excerpt from Coboconk (author unknown)

Sitting at the junction of Highway 35 and the former Highway 48 on the northern tip of
Balsam Lake is the small village of Coboconk. With a population of less than 800, mostly
retirees or commuters to nearby cities, the town is now largely sustained by a number of
cottagers who summer, and sometimes winter in the Kawartha Lakes. Life was not
always so quiet in Coboconk. When the lumber and sawmill industries were in full swing,
the town “hummed with the noise of commerce and streets were filled with sweating
teams journeying to and fro, transporting produce and raw material” (Suggitt, 1972, 252).
In 1920 J.E.H. MacDonald spent a summer in Coboconk visiting Fred Peel, a friend and
owner of a local lumber mill, and described it as “a serene country” (Duvall, 1978, 141).
A print of one of his paintings, Coboconk Village, hangs proudly in the home of Bill
Shields, one of my participants who has lived in Coboconk his whole life. The history of
the village, as quoted in the University of Toronto Graduate, can be summarized as
follows: “Coby’s not a large place. The population never got to be more than seven or
eight hundred people. Years ago, there was logging and such like, lumber mills and a
lime kiln. Now there’s a plywood factory and for the last 25 years it’s been a tourist area”
(1978, Spring, 3). The plywood factory has since closed down. Some villagers now
describe their dear old ‘Coby’ as a ghost town.
Like other rural Canadian villages, Coboconk is structured around what Elizabeth Furniss (1999) defines as the frontier myth. The figure of the pioneer plays an important role in the town’s culture, attitudes, and behaviours. When choosing participants for the project, Eleanor, a key informant, found it quite important that they be ‘Coby people’, who have resided in the community for some time, raised their children there, and perhaps even grew up there themselves. These people, who often come from an ancestral line of Coboconk settlers, are considered to be the town’s modern day pioneers. This paper will explore how Coboconk is framed by the frontier myth, in the context of both work and play.

A Short Note on Methodology

It is important with every study to understand how the author came to such conclusions, and what sort of research led them there. This section is not meant to argue a point, it is simply a self-reflexive analysis of the preliminary research. The goal of the project has been to conduct a series of interviews with elderly members of the Coboconk community in collaboration with the Shedden Area Historical Society, in order to gather information on the pioneers and early settlers to the region. The historical society’s representatives, Karin Mackie and Eleanor MacNeil, soon became my key informants and collaborative partners on the project. Our first task was to choose two of the most important places of memory in the community. Karin and Eleanor informed me that these would be the mills and the arena. Their next task was to choose a series of participants whom I later contacted for in-depth, informal interviews. Karin and Eleanor accompanied
me to these interviews and often asked many of their own questions to the participants as
well. Thus, the interview process was a collaborative project and there were often more
than three people in a room at once during a given interview. Paul Thompson (2000), in
his manual on conducting oral history, warns the reader that when interviews are
conducted with others present, “boasting and exaggeration may be reduced, but the
tendency to conform will be greatly increased” (140). My findings demonstrate that most
of the participants did indeed tend to hold the same views and attitudes, and hardly ever
argued over their interpretations of specific places and events. This can be a result of the
conformity Thompson speaks about, but I would like to draw attention to another
potential explanation: All of the participants had been chosen because they were
respectable members of the community and were thought to be the most knowledgeable.
Most of the participants could trace back at least one generation of their family to the
region and were definitely the ‘Coby people’ I have described above. This, combined
with the fact that they represented the same socio-economic class, ethnic descent and age
group, meant that they shared many of the same social views and experiences. As John
Porter (1972) explains in his analysis of social class in Canada, when a society’s
inhabitants and image-creators all come from a small, closely-linked group, the images
they produce are more likely to be consistent than if they were part of a bigger, more
heterogeneous one. The participants chosen for this study are some of the town’s most
public, respected, and known figures, and thus do have a degree of influence. They can
be considered, to a certain extent, as the image-makers of the community. By telling their
stories and shaping the past, these participants are reinforcing the “pioneer” values that
will be described further. The total number of interviewees was ten people, which
included both men and women over the age of 65. To complement these interviews I have drawn on information from newspapers, pamphlets, and brochures, many of which were offered to me by the participants themselves.

Mythologies of Memory

Maurice Halbwachs (1992) once noted that “we preserve memories of each epoch in our lives, and these are continually reproduced; through them, as by a continual relationship, a sense of our identity is perpetuated” (47). This paper explores the memories of a group of people living in a rural community one hour north of Toronto, and how these memories are contextualized through what Furniss (1999) has coined the ‘frontier myth’. Halbwachs asserts that memories can only be understood within group contexts. These contexts form categories that allow us to link our thoughts into coherent narratives. Events of the past are recalled under the collective conceptions shared by the group, and as such may differ from those that have been constructed and reconstructed by other groups. My participants were considered to be ‘Coby people’, that is, people who had resided in the community for many years, and often could trace their lineage back more than one generation in the region. The contexts of their memories are not only shared with each other, but also through relationships with their family heritage within the community.

The relationship with one’s ancestral place or lineage is a concept explored by David Lowenthal (1998) in his study of heritage. Lowenthal suggests that the purpose of heritage is to validate our own virtues and behaviours while excluding those of others. In
this specific case, Coboconk’s heritage encourages pride in the town and its history, it validates the hard work of the pioneers who first settled the land, and for many of the participants, pride in one’s familial roots within the region. Lowenthal argues that people are generally not concerned with whether or not their heritage is historically accurate. This is because heritage itself is more about validating ideas of who we are rather than procuring physical evidence. While this may be true at an unconscious level, my participants were careful to provide me with accurate data, and many offered me physical evidence in the form of newspapers, brochures, and letters to justify their stories.

Lowenthal’s argument, however, is still important. Members of the Coboconk community recall their pasts in ways that facilitate the belief in the pioneer values of hard work, honestly, and neighbourliness. Thus, their pasts confirm and justify who they are as a community, and who they have always been. Belonging to this legacy (either through bloodline or behaviour), allows them as individuals to truly belong to the community itself.

Lowenthal is optimistic about the work of the local historian. He claims that to know where you come from is essentially to know yourself, to feel in possession of an identity, and thus “regaining an ancestral legacy” allows for an enlarged sense of self (36). The traits that make us who we are have been perceived to have been handed down to us from our predecessors. They form the foundation of our identities as members of a given community, nation, family or ethnicity. Lowenthal also states that “the worth of many legacies is weighted by their durability” (184). For the community of Coboconk, these legacies date back to the values and hardships of the early pioneers who first bought up and cleared the land of the back townships.
Elizabeth Furniss (1999), in *The Burden of History*, explores the ways in which colonial constructs create and control “definitions of public identities, histories, and present realities; through aligning experience within a contemporary historical epistemology profoundly shaped by the colonial context” (187). Furniss suggests that Euro-Canadian identity, within a northern British Columbia industry town, is expressed through the frontier myth, a selective historical epistemology that celebrates the ‘discovery’ and ‘conquest’ of an empty wilderness by non-Aboriginal settlers. The frontier myth expresses the ‘benevolent’ notion that Europeans brought a superior civilization to the Aboriginal people, and thus their assimilation was both inevitable and desirable. At a local level, this myth is perpetuated through the symbol of the pioneer. The pioneer embodies the popular Euro-Canadian values of hard work, independence, and freedom, which are frequently juxtaposed with stereotypes of the Indian as lazy, drunk, and violent. This dichotomy allows the Euro-Canadians at Williams Lake to create an identity for themselves in opposition to the negative one imposed on local Aboriginal people.

The community of Coboconk is not located in close proximity to any significant aboriginal population. The Iroquois and Ojibway populations had been resettled to Rice Lake long before the town was established. Thus, the distinction between ‘white’ and ‘aboriginal’ is not one of the main elements of identity formation within the community itself. I argue, however, that the experience of living in what had previously been a rural industry town, provides my participants with similar ideologies to that of the frontier myth. The frontier myth promotes that “physical labour in the mills or in the bush, and the entrepreneurialism of associated small businesses, are the most valued forms of work.
The emphasis on independence, hard work, and competitiveness captures an essential ‘frontier spirit’ of the city” (7). The myth is experienced as a ‘taken for granted’ truth about the reality of the social world and is shaped and symbolized by what Furniss refers to as “epitomizing events”, which “typically deal with the heroic actions of individuals whose values, moral standards, characters, motives for action, and internal struggles to define public ideals of both American and Canadian culture: independence, self-sufficiency, freedom, courage, materialism, and advancement through hard work” (18). The frontier myth glorifies historical accounts of settlers’ freedom and independence in taming a wild land that was rich in resources and free for the taking. Furniss argues that “all histories are selective accounts, highlighting certain events and actors while relegating others into the background” (75). The selected historical tradition that defines the Coboconk community allows residents to construct collective identities, affirm public values and promote certain interests within their communities and, as such, serves an important function as the framework for the coherent narrative of their society.

Though only an hour outside the city and a prime location for the weekend cottage industry, Coboconk was once a rural ‘backwater’ with limited access to city amenities. As is typical of most small Canadian towns, “social relations are defined by friendliness, hospitality, social harmony, egalitarianism, informality, and a commitment to family” (Furniss, 80). One afternoon, having forgotten where one of our participants resided, Eleanor and I inquired for her address at the local post office where we were given the address without question. “Small towns!” laughed Eleanor as we drove onwards towards our destination, “everyone knows everyone here!” (personal
This anecdote exemplifies the small-town mentality of neighbourliness that underlies the frontier myth.

A large part of the frontier myth is shaped by the image that people outside of the community make of it. From an urban perspective, “rural communities have long been portrayed as existing outside of time, as frozen in history, as epitomizing the traditional, harmonious cultures of the past from which contemporary urban societies have long since evolved” (Furniss, 83). Ian McKay (1994), in his work on the fisherfolk of Nova Scotia, explains how the Nova Scotian ‘Folk’ epitomized the “simple truth, work, and virtue, the antithesis of all that was overcivilized, tired, conventional, and insincere” to urban middle-class tourists (12). Representing a past tradition that is no longer within the grasp of urban middle-class dwellers, the simple ‘Folk’ symbolize a continuation of “that ideal type of a society bound together by tradition, custom, and faith, and permanently rooted over generations in small, uncommercialized communities” (12). McKay argues that the ‘Folk’ were understood to represent Western civilization before the processes of modernization and industrialization contaminated it. The Folk were the last ‘authentic’ vestiges of Western or Canadian culture. The rural Nova Scotia coast differs greatly from the northern tip of southern Ontario, where nature’s dangers lurk in forests rather than oceans. Nevertheless, the essentialization of rural simplicity is useful to this discussion. It can be likened to Furniss’s statement that, “in evoking pioneer values and traditions, Euro-Canadians are making claims to a continuity between the present and the past. They are creating public identities founded on the presumption of a set of unchanging cultural values and traditions that unite old-time settlers and contemporary residents in one cultural community” (102). Coboconk, like rural Nova Scotia, is easily dismissed by
urbanites as a ‘simple’, ‘traditional’ and ‘unchanging’ place. On the contrary, though Coboconk’s residents still pride themselves on their traditional sense of culture and values, their town has changed significantly over the century, from a lumber camp, to a mill town, to a sleepy bedroom community.

In his quest to uncover *The Mind of Ontario*, Royce MacGillivray (1985) outlines a concept similar to that of Furniss but based his in the context of the southern Ontario farmer. Though Coboconk has been more of a logging town than a farming one, this theory sheds light on the ‘pioneer’ in an Ontarian context. MacGillivray explains that the “well-loved figure of legend, the pioneer,” eventually “became that unloved figure, the farmer” (61). As southern Ontario shifted from being a primarily rural region to becoming an urban one, the farmer was seen as “physically distasteful because he was dirty, and he was drenched in sweat, and he STANK!” (61). The farmer was thought to be a fool for working so hard, for so long, in such unpleasant circumstances and making very little money to show for his labour. The typical farmer figure was understood to be “as grim and drab as his surroundings…he was laughed at for his clothes, his stubble beard, his ignorance of the life of cities, for the supposed narrowness of his horizons” (61).

MacGillivray notes that most city dwellers at this time were often only one generation removed from an urban livelihood themselves and suggests that open distaste for the figure of the farmer was an attempt at masking one’s own rural or agricultural roots. The negative view of the farmer began to change when the population of southern Ontario became a mostly urban region. Now, almost a ‘relic of the past’, the farmer was regarded as “the ideal man, living the ideal life” (62). The farmer who stayed on his land rather than migrating to the city was understood to be a noble purist, fulfilling a divine calling.
Disillusioned with the stress of modern urban life, people flocked to the countryside, to weekend farms that provided them with a means to live the ‘country life’ whenever they had the freedom to do so, and to establish what they deemed to be true family roots and legacies of their own. The rural myth that MacGillivray alludes to operates in Coboconk, where tourists spend their summers lounging in the town, and retirees enjoy the peace and tranquility of country living.

**Historical Context**

In order to discuss the frontier myth in Coboconk, it is necessary to understand how the pioneers themselves settled and adapted the land to make it what it is today. The region of the Kawartha Lakes was destined for settlement in the early 19th century. Britain had run short of timber, which she needed to build and repair the ships of her royal navy. The Napoleonic War had blocked her traditional supply in the Baltic countries of northern Europe, so Britain had turned to Canada as her main supplier (Lambert, 1967). In their report on *The Countryside of Ontario*, Troughton and Nelson (1998) summarize the goal of settlement in this region:

> The purpose of land settlement in nineteenth century Ontario was to colonize territory, create a family farming system, and produce a surplus of farm products for export. The settlement system, planned in London, England, was arranged on the landscape to service the farming community and to support the staples economy, that is, to facilitate the extraction of commodity surpluses, which were partly processed and then shipped to external markets, primarily in Britain. (10)

In 1816, the Trent River Valley housed a forest of Pines said to stand “from 100 to 180 and occasionally, perhaps to 200 feet in height” (Baskerville, 2005, 66). At the beginning
of the 1830s, British travellers were already lamenting the vastly naked areas of southern Upper Canada and by 1875, “lumber companies were in a continual and increasingly difficult search for rich pine stands: in Southern Ontario, farmers and lumberers had stripped many areas of 80 per cent of the original forest cover” (Baskerville, 2005, 66). Lumber aside, settlers were keen to buy up land for clearing and farming in the New World and “by 1840 almost all of southwest Ontario had been cleared, and settlers had begun moving into the Canadian Shield. This immigration pushed the population from 90,000 in 1812 to around 230,000 in 1831 and close to 500,000 by 1842” (Whitcomb, 2007, 10) It was at this time that the Upper Canadian frontier was pushed back to the region that would eventually contain the village of Coboconk.

Upper Canada was considered to be ‘poor man’s country’, where with little money and hard work, one could make a new and sufficient life for himself and his family. Baskerville states that “the promise of a higher standard of living attracted many to Upper Canada. Between 1825 and 1851, Upper Canada was the fastest-growing community in North America. In 1826 it boasted a per capita output some three times that of Ireland” (2005, 71). As incoming immigrants took up most of the available farmland in southern Ontario, disappointed newcomers were quick to depart for the West or the United States shortly after their arrival. In order to accommodate a larger population, it was decided that the Muskoka region would be colonized for settlement in 1850, and the village of Coboconk, not too far away, was founded. Richard Tatley (1996), in his historical account of the settling of the Muskoka Lakes, exclaims that “the country needed a frontier, and a frontier it would have” (17). However, most settlers did not last long on the Canadian Shield. With little support to farm their largely infertile land, many
families were forced to give up their dreams of success in Ontario and head west. The train that had been built to bring people to the townships instead led them away toward the promise of riches in Manitoba (Baskerville, 2002).

The end of the 20s was a time of great change for Coboconk. In 1929 The Gull River Company, which had moved logs by water to Coboconk witnessed its last drive. Since the 1860s, lumbermen had been working the drives along the Gull River and it has been remembered as a time of great adventure; these lumberers were the region’s own adventurous and brave frontiermen (Reynolds, 1973, 66). The end of the 1920s also introduced a new age for transportation, and though the Toronto-Nipissing Railway continued to stop at the Coboconk station, “automobile production had emerged as Ontario’s single most important industry” (Baskerville, 2005, 191). By the 1940s, “70 per cent of rural households owned cars compared to 43 per cent of urban households…decreasing car prices in the 1920s (the Model T cost $650 in 1914 and $415 in 1926) broadened ownership possibilities among members of the labouring classes” (Baskerville, 2005, 191). Increased mobility allowed a larger amount of people to travel to and from Coboconk for work and pleasure, and opened the town up to more opportunities for mills and factories.

The pioneers of what is now known as the Kawartha Lakes region arguably lived harder lives than those in other parts of the province at that time. The Canadian Shield made for poor farmland, thus lumbering and later sawmills were nearly the only option for income for many settlers and their families. Lumbering, however, could separate men from their families for months on end, and often offered little in terms of income. Logging was highly dangerous employment, and took the lives of many a young and
healthy man. As Lowenthal argues, our traits are handed down to us through ancestral legacies. The hardiness, optimism, and hard work that allowed these early pioneers to overcome the harsh landscape are thought to have been handed down to true ‘Coby people’, who know the meaning of hard work and the importance of looking out for one another.

The Legacy of Roses and Thorns

During almost every interview conducted for this project, it was suggested by my participants that I read *Roses and Thorns*, a self published book by a woman named Glays Suggitt (1972) from a neighbouring town. Most of the participants owned their own copy of the book and believed that it was a historical goldmine concerning the history of Coboconk and region. This book, being the only one that came up during discussion, is the main source of pioneer history for Coboconk. The book opens with the following lines:

Folk who forget the past, may well loose their future. To forget the faith, courage and sacrifices of our pioneering ancestors, and to fail to pay tribute to the spiritual, moral, physical achievements of those men and women, deprives us all of a wealth of inspiration sadly needed in a commercial world. (1)

From its beginning, the book expresses a deep nostalgia for times past, in which the region’s pioneers lived most gracefully and gratefully on the land Suggitt calls her home. The goal of the text is to introduce its readers to the ‘little people’ involved in building the nearby communities, people which Suggitt claims have been omitted from museum exhibits and narratives. Her chapters range the topic of marriage, to farming, road building, cooking, shopping, schooling, and of course, lumbering. Frontier values are
highlighted in that “each community has buried within its past unrecorded tales of heroism, and has numbered among its pioneers men and women of vision and dedication” (1). Suggitt exclaims that “no frontier was ever developed without the faith, courage and sacrifices of the ‘little people’ who pioneered the land” (1). She suggests that we should respect the noble work of ‘our pioneer ancestors’ because all of their actions and decisions were based on a high moral caliber and religious faith. As well as being hardworking and morally superior, the pioneers were “brave and resourceful people, for thrift and ingenuity were the mainstay of all successful pioneering enterprises” (1). Finally, Suggitt states that these pioneers had “no claim to greatness except that which comes from a job well done” (2), which highlights the frontier values mentioned above.

The book dedicates a chapter to the region’s ‘Indian’ occupation, a time “far in the remote ages of the past”, when “the hills and vales of our forests were populated by the Indians” (emphasis added, 4). Though Suggitt does state that “could the veil which enshrouds the unwritten past be withdrawn, we would find revealed many scenes of valour and heroism,” this suggests that the Indian is just that, a mythical figure of the shrouded, unwritten past who no longer belongs on the land that is now ‘ours’. This chapter is reminiscent of the literature reviewed by Furniss about the local history of Williams Lake in British Columbia. Furniss concludes that these histories validate and justify the conquest of a ‘free land’, and the inevitable assimilation and extinction of local Indigenous cultures. As soon as Suggitt introduces the arrival of the settlers, any mention of the ‘Indian’ past ceases entirely. Once the settlers have conquered the land, it becomes ‘ours’ and ‘they’ are no longer relevant historical figures. They are not part of ‘our’ history.
Suggitt emphasizes the hardships that early settlers faced around the Coboconk region. She exclaims that “few can imagine the months of hardship it would have involved had the rain spoiled the flour, nor the tragedy of using needed capital to replace the winter’s food, can hardly be grasped by the average person to-day” (134). In pioneer homes, “nothing was wasted, each piece of paper was carefully kept for future use, even small pieces of string were kept, as very little of it was available in the average home” (2). Suggitt contrasts this behaviour to that of the city folk, by describing the short supply of doctors in the region: “very few poor doctors existed among the pioneers, for lazy or slothful men did not possess the stamina to withstand the rigours of pioneer life. Greedy men look for a place among more moneyed people” (262). In making this distinction Suggitt elevates the moral superiority of rural pioneer life above that of the urban cosmopolitan.

In this book, Coboconk is described as having “remained a sleepy little village whose people have mostly been numbered among the ‘Little People’, but within it the early friendliness has continued to exist” (263). The close connection to neighbours, which accounts for the notions of friendliness, has arguably created an illusion of an egalitarian society:

Men were men by virtue of their own right, and while all did not achieve the same degree of success, all were on the same social level. Neighbours were too few to be coldly, or haughtily treated, and those who had hewn their way side by side into the fastness of the Canadian bush, by that right stood on the same level. (289)

The hardship that caused settlers to rely so much on their neighbours and community is the foundation of what Suggitt suggests is the ‘simple life’: “it is impossible to recapture the essence of that simple way of life. This is primarily a generation that has never known hardship, or even been deprived of physical necessities, and at the same time has
experienced little of the joy of creating its own pleasure” (291). Much like Suggitt’s pioneers, McKay’s fisherfolk have been interpreted as living ‘simple’ lives. Fraught with hardship, they take pleasure in the small things, rather than seeking out complex (urban) existences.

Working in Coboconk

According to The Post Mercury, “the mainstay industry in the village which was founded in the 1850s, has been lumber” (May 18, 1972). The lumber drives, which involved the cutting and shipping of large quantities of pine, naturally led to the erection of a number of lumber and saw mills. The same article states that William Shields operated a sawmill west of the highway 15. After a fire had ravaged it, Shields sold his mill to the Gull River Lumber Company, which was built between 1913 and 1914 and operated as both a sawmill and a veneer plant for fruit baskets. In 1933, a few years after the last lumber drives in Coboconk, the company declared bankruptcy and was purchased by Gull River Veneers Ltd, managed by Walter Peel. Again in 1950 the plant was purchased by Wilberforce Veneer and ran under that name until 1956, when it became the Quality Plywood and Veneer Company. This operation lasted 10 years until it too filed for bankruptcy in 1967 and became VicPly (Victoria Plywood), under the ownership and management of John and Jim Hickey. The lumber drives had created, and continues to drive the spirit of the community. Brave, adventurous lumbermen became shift workers at the local mill but the values of hard work, honesty, and looking out for one’s fellow workers remained enshrined in the spirit of what had once been the lumber frontier.
Friday, June 20th, 1958, at 3:30pm was the official opening of the Quality Plywood & Veneer Co. Ltd. The arrival of a new business in Coboconk was not an event to be ignored. The program demonstrates that the event included an open house of the new plant, a rendition of “God Save the Queen” by the Coboconk Public School, and even an introduction by guest speaker, Hon. Leslie M. Frost, premier of Ontario himself, followed by refreshments in the main office under the supervision of the Women’s Institute of Coboconk. It was not until 1962 that Joe Smales, one of my participants, came to work for Quality Plywood. But only three years later, he had chosen to take up a position at another firm, in another town. Glen Powell, another participant, was originally from Coboconk himself, but was working in Wilberforce until he met his wife Ruby.

“Soon as I found Ruby I came home!” Glen exclaimed, looking at his wife. He hadn’t wanted to buy a house ‘up there’ with his new wife and family and never leave. Glen gladly took a job with Quality Plywood in order to come home. During their interviews both of these men demonstrated that they were none too eager about the manner in which Quality Plywood was being run, and had both prematurely deduced that it was headed for a downward spiral before they left. Unsatisfied with the employment he had taken after leaving Quality Plywood, Glen even tried to come back to the plant, but was soon just as disillusioned as when he had left:

I went in there to see about getting a job and they said ‘what can you do?’ and I said ‘well I worked here before’. They said ‘what kind of job do you want’ and I said ‘I don’t care’. So I went there and I remember him taking me down, we were walking down ‘we do this here, and this here, and this here’. I thought, well the way he’s talking and going on about doing things, I didn’t like it. It didn’t sound good...He was still walking ahead of me and I turned around, I was gone when he got to the end. I still remember that, he was going down through there and I thought there’s no use in going through all this. (personal communication, Feb. 22, 2010)
When ‘Big John Hickey’, called Joe up one day and asked him to come back to the town to work for the newly created VicPly, for which he was the new owner, Joe gladly accepted the offer and made his way back to ‘Coby’. Shortly after this, Joe ran into Glen and asked if he would like a new job under him. Glen was quick to answer yes and from there, both men worked at VicPly until the 1982 fire that ended Coboconk’s industrial production for good. A jack-of-all-trades, Glen was soon promoted to floor foreman under Joe and the two remain friends today. In fact, friendship seems to be a main theme in the dynamics of working at the plant, according to these interviews. In sharing their stories with me, Joe and Glen continuously list others who were with them during their work shifts, or on business trips. Who they were working with seemed to be as important as what the work itself entailed. Relations of kinship and friendship are very important to Glen and Joe, but they are not alone in thinking this way. As has been discussed in the literature above, the idea that rural livelihoods are reminiscent of simpler times, suggests that working relationships are harmonious and intimate, and that everyone watches out for each other. John Porter (1972) problematizes the rural myth by explaining that the “rural environment has been for Canada an important source of the image of equality” (4). He explains that “the historical source of the image of a classless Canada is the equality among pioneers in the frontier environment of the last century” (3). Porter also suggests that Canada’s image portrays the notion that “there is neither very rich nor very poor” and that “there are no barriers to opportunity” due to our free access to education (4). Therefore, however successful one is in reaching their full potential is subject to their own ambition. Porter, however, is adamant that this myth is an illusion and that “class is something which is experienced in everyday life and hence becomes real” (11). He
specifically alludes to the experience of class within small and rural communities in the following statement:

Most communities have their ‘old families,’ their ‘high class’ streets, and their ‘other side of the tracks’…between these institutional poles which separate the high rankers from the low rankers is the unpretentious and respectable social life of the middle groups. Any perceptive and articulate person who has lived in a community for some time becomes aware of the community culture which separates people and groups into class levels. He also becomes aware of who ‘belongs’ and who does not, which of the cliques and groups ‘rate’ and which do not. (13)

The illusion of class equality may be one reason that a worker’s union was never formed in Coboconk. But the fact that no union has ever officially existed may not necessarily be for lack of trying. In fact, according to Joe and his wife Betty, a couple of worker’s strikes did take place in Coboconk in the mid-to late 60s. As the manager of the plant, Joe was subject to aggression from some of the workers, who would paddle to and fro outside of his house in a canoe for nights on end in order to get his attention. On one occasion, Joe had to drive a loaded truck down to Toronto to transport supplies, so he left his wife with adequate protection from the strikers. “We had a double-barreled shotgun! And he lent it to me…” explains his wife Betty. Afraid of leaving his wife alone, Joe told her to “shoot them if they come back!” Betty laughs and exclaims that “that thing was so heavy, by the time I’d lifted it up, I could never have fired at anything.” The protestors followed Joe and his truck all the way into Toronto. He explains that when “we got back to work, of course they were moaning and bitching and we said ‘well if we hadn’t taken that load to Toronto, you buggers wouldn’t be getting paid anything’” (personal communication, Feb. 22, 2010). This anecdote suggests that employees of the mill were aware of their status as working-class labourers. If this is true, why didn’t a union ever form in Coboconk?
Anthony Winson (1997), in his essay “Does Class Consciousness Exist in Rural Communities?” argues that “a strong farm and small town ideology plays a very significant role in structuring the way workers think about, and ultimately deal with, economic crisis” (429). He claims that many rural towns have a processual class-consciousness by which “the degree to which a recognition exists of the opposed class interests of labor and capital is considered by several observers to be an essential element of class consciousness” (430). Though Coboconk’s plants were never unionized, and working relationships are very much structured through kinship and community ties, the existence of the strikes, no matter how small, demonstrate an awareness of class-consciousness. At Quality Plywood, and later VicPly, workers knew each other personally and in all probability shared their experiences with each other, meaning that when experiences were negative, this was not attributed to individual inadequacy but understood in a group context. According to Winson, this would create a group working-class-consciousness. Such a conclusion opposes Porter’s view that in Canadian society especially, all failings are understood to be individual in nature, due to our perceived equality of access to education, etc. However, Winson also concludes that “the actual character and changes in any of these occupational or structural variables are mediated by such factors as national culture and politics, organizational structures, and ideologies” (432). Formal working class organizations were never formed in Coboconk, and the community is still structured around the frontier myth. The union never became the extension of the worker’s consciousness and thus the worker was still understood as the self-made, hardworking man. Who then, is to blame when things go wrong, if it is not the individual or the class system?
In answer to this question, Winson suggests that “the rural and small-town milieu is occasionally viewed as a site where issues quickly get polarized around labor management and left-right divisions” (433). Glen was reluctant to work at Quality Plywood because of the way it was managed by the previous owners: “I came down and asked somebody and they said ‘oh it’s going pretty good now, there’s another guy in there’ and that’s when Joe came. Because before that it was these Jews and everything and it was working but nothing was ever fixed up, they’d just pocket the money” (personal communication, Feb. 22, 2010). Glen’s negative experience, upon coming back to ‘Coby’ was not an issue with the way workers were treated by the state, or with a perception of his own failings, but with attitude and capabilities of the plant’s management:

Betty: With Jack [the owner/manager] you either liked him or you didn’t. He was that kind of a fellow.
Glen: The way he was talking that day, I didn’t like him. (personal communication, Feb. 22, 2010)

Glen did not agree with the way the mill was being run by the management. When Joe later became the manager of VicPly, Glen was in favour of the way the mill was being run and showed nothing but optimism and loyalty:

Joe: He did everything!
Glen: I did. Joe used to say to me ‘don’t do that, you don’t have to do that, go and get a guy to do it for you’. But I said ‘it only takes a minute, I’ll do it’.
Glen: Joe was the best boss I ever had…you didn’t mind doing it.
Karin: You didn’t mind doing it for Joe. (personal communication, Feb. 22, 2010)

According to Winson, in working conditions based on personal relationships, people are more likely to accept their position within a certain hierarchy. In some cases, this sort of dynamic may form a paternalistic atmosphere where employee age and seniority is the
key determinant of whether or not employees will harbour deferential attitudes around their work. Glen had worked on the sander at VicPly for almost five years when he was first asked to become floor supervisor, but he initially declined the offer:

Then Joe said to be one day ‘Oh we want somebody to help on the floor and look after the machines and keep things going. Would you be interested?’ And I said ‘no I don’t think I would’. ‘Oh well why?’ I was younger then, most of the ones there were all my age and younger. And then the ones that weren’t, they were relatives! So I said ‘no I don’t think I do’. ‘Well why?’ and I said ‘well, just on account of that.’ (personal communication, Feb. 22, 2010)

The worker hierarchy at the mill was understood to be one based on seniority and merit rather than social class. Thus, it can be argued that nothing came of the strikes on account of this paternalistic dynamic. Further, due to the “stress on independence, and the prevailing concern among residents about the reaction of the community” which is evident in the frontier myth, economic changes and class inequalities are prevented from “being translated into public protest and other political actions” (Winson, 435).

A key event in the lives of Winson’s participants was “the plant closure and demise of jobs around which many of them had built their lives for years, even decades” (439). When the VicPly plant took fire in October of 1982, the Coboconk residents demonstrated the same somber attitudes as did Winson’s. Also in accordance with Winson’s participants was that once it became known that the plant would not be rebuilt, the VicPly workers “showed passive acceptance of the layoff, or an attitude of resignation to their situation, with little anger or resentment” (442). In an article headlined “Coboconk’s Hopes Rest on Plant Reopening” in the Haliburton County Echo of April 7, 1982, it was reported that “many families have been reduced to living on unemployment benefits alone and local businesses have suffered from that reduction in buying power” (front page). According to this article, the plant was situated too close to
the water and would need to obtain a pressurized water system in order to conform to new government regulations. Lacking in sufficient funds for the project, the plant closed its doors to Coboconk. Two former workers interviewed for the *Haliburton Echo* article were said to be “just barely making it”, but still counted themselves lucky not to be in serious debt. Joe and Glen, during our interview, remarked that most people left town entirely in search of new employment. Clara Schell is quoted in the *Haliburton Echo* as claiming that she “wants the plant to be rebuilt again. It’s not just the convenience…or the money but more because she genuinely wants to see the factory operate again.” She is then quoted as saying “you couldn’t wish for better people than them to work for.” It is evident that the Coboconk community, though sad to see their mill go, have accepted their fate without complaint. Such an attitude can be understood as being based in a century-old struggle by early settlers to overcome hardship and build themselves a place to call home.

In his study on rural communities in southern Ontario, Winson concludes that many towns have indicated “the strong presence of values—individualism, independence, stress on the possibility of mobility” (447). This moderates the effect of the structures and factors that in more urban regions could have led to radical unionism. This rural cultural orientation is not compatible with trade unionism as was understood by most of his respondents as supporting the bad workers and punishing the good. The ‘grin and bear it’ and ‘don’t complain’ pioneer attitudes that sustained the workers during their plant careers remained with them when the plant shut down.
Playing in Coboconk

As Suggit exclaims in her book, “men cannot live by bread alone…to-day’s generations are prone to look upon the pioneer era as a period of hum-drum existence. The idea that the pioneers lived a dull life composed only of drudgery and hardships is a false idea. It is true that certain tasks demanded endurance and long hours of hard labour, but there were also slack times when our forefathers relaxed and enjoyed themselves” (189). Just like the pioneers of Suggit’s history, the Coboconk community saves time for pleasure. In such a small community, the boundaries between places of work and places of leisure are blurred. Bill Shields, 89 years old and the oldest of my participants, has grown up in Coboconk and can trace his family lineage in the village back several generations. He remembers using the mill as a playground before he was old enough to have ever worked there:

When we were kids, they’d fill the pond with logs. We used to run logs. They floated really well. But then you landed on oak or something and that didn’t float so well and you’d go down and skin your knees. We’d play tag on them. (personal communication, Feb. 8, 2010)

For Bill, and other members of the community, work and play occurred simultaneously on a daily basis as most people worked with their neighbours, family and friends. Other places, however, were designated strictly for leisure-time. The most treasured of these places, according to my participants, was the Coboconk Memorial Arena, which stood for about fifteen years before it was condemned and torn down by the government. In her book, Suggitt paints the reader a picture of how the early settlers would spend their leisure time skating: “when skates did become available the lakes and ponds were the
scene of happy times. On frosty moonlit nights, graceful figures would glide swiftly over the icy surfaces, returning periodically to the warmth of the glowing bonfire” (190). One might say that Suggitt’s image is too perfect for reality. Betty, one of my respondents and Joe’s wife, admits that she “used to do fundraisers to get some ice up there and Doris would have all-night skate parties, and I can’t even stand up on skates but I’d put a pair of skates on and hang on to somebody and go around” (personal communication, Feb. 22, 2010). Not all pioneer folk were the graceful skaters Sugitt makes them out to be. Like Betty, there are those for whom skating does not come naturally. As well, unlike Suggitt’s picture, there is little talk of a warm, glowing fires among my participants.

During one of our interviews, Eleanor shared a story about her father who would never miss a game, but would stand by the boards, “frozen stiff to begin with but he was just shaking so much.” Although not as perfect as Suggitt’s idealized image, skating in Coboconk has been a very important activity.

The Coboconk Community Memorial Arena was opened on February 27th, 1952, at the site of where had previously been an outdoor rink. According to the Fenelon Falls Gazette, about 1200 people attended the event (March 5th, 1953, front page). Although the local children had played on the outdoor rink, with what Glen admits were just shin-pads and hockey sticks, the erection of an indoor arena promised Coboconk a chance to participate in the ORHA (Ontario Rural Hockey Association) and gave the community a form of entertainment and pride. Just as he had come for the opening of Quality Plywood and VicPly, Premier Leslie Frost spoke at the opening of the arena, during which a refrigerator was raffled off to raise funds for the local hockey team. In her unpublished memoir, Eleanor dedicates a page to the arena alone. She explains how important these
games were to the community, and that “the arena filled up with loyal fans when our team played a home game. The standing-room-only areas soon became crowded with supporters” and “the roaring of the crowds could be heard downtown on the main street during these games.” Similarly, Bill remembers the nights when the whole town would gather at the arena for a night of entertainment:

  Oh yeah they used to have a good turnout for the rink. I think generally they’d have maybe two or three people come down from Norland and all over the place. Everybody was interested in it. The town supported it very well. They could cheer their heroes. (personal communication, Feb. 8, 2010)

Elmer Bowins, another participant, played on the Coboconk hockey team with Bill in his youth. In grade school, Elmer watched the arena being built and maintains that it became a valuable part of his life once it was erected:

  It was a beautiful arena. When I was a kid there was nothing better. I was only fifteen years old and on the senior team. They were all older than me! One of the guys I played with, now he’s 89…yeah we played a lot of hockey in that rink. Basically that’s the memories I remember of it. We had hockey pretty near every friggin’ night! (personal communication, Feb. 8, 2010)

The arena is sorely missed by all of the town’s residents, who declare that it was unfairly and prematurely torn down by the government. Elmer states that “it was actually nothing but politics” and that “the government closing these rinks at the time they were closing them was nonsense. That was just the undoing of all these small communities they couldn’t afford to rink” (personal communication, Feb. 8, 2010). When my participants remember the arena now, what they recall are the many hockey games that once brought the entire community together on cold winter nights.

  According to Daniel Francis (1997) in his popular book, National Dreams, “hockey expresses something basic about Canada…hockey allows Canadians to be proud of ourselves, to puff up our chests and feel we are the best at something” (167). Though
Francis’ argument is conducted on a national level, it could easily be applied to the town of Coboconk itself. All of my participants demonstrated great pride at the success of what had been Coboconk’s ‘great team’. Bill claims that the arena was truly “a real asset for the town. We had pretty good hockey teams in those days.” Competition in the ORHA allowed Coboconk residents to assert their importance and success in the region by displaying their physical skill and stamina. Glen, who never played hockey competitively but always supported his team from the stands, exclaimed that other teams “had a hard time to beat Coby, if they did! And Coby, they had a good team. Coby was right up there” (personal communication, Feb. 22, 2010).

Francis argues that hockey is “Canada’s game” because it represents our wilderness and northerness. He explains that “the blank expanse of ice represents the vast, frigid, dispassionate wilderness, or so the metaphorically-inclined tell us, and every game dramatizes the struggle for survival in such a difficult land” (167). This metaphor can be associated with the pioneer myth: hard work and struggle through harsh conditions, conquering the northern wilderness and asserting ourselves in a frozen wasteland. In fact, when the region of what is not called the Kawartha Lakes was first opened up for settlement, it was known as the “wasteland of the province” (Barnes, 2004, 14). Plots of land were given away for free when it became obvious that the land was unsuitable for agricultural settlement. Many settlers left for greener pastures, but the forefathers of Coboconk were the ones who stayed behind, and the ones who metaphorically carved through the ice with their skates and made their goal. In her review of local histories of Williams Lake, Furniss notices that the wilderness of British Columbia is described as “a dark force against which settlers continually struggle” (66).
The wilderness signifies conquest over the unknown and the untouched, a challenge, and the thrill of danger. Francis argues that hockey also provides us with an alternate history:

In the hockey version of history, Canada has always been a superpower, and its citizens enjoyed an idyllic childhood playing on frozen ponds and dreaming of a career in the NHL. Hockey is a sport bathed in nostalgia for a simpler time when players didn’t wear helmets…a time when we owned our own heroes and controlled our own culture. (168)

A passion for the game brings Canadians together but it can also bring entire communities together. Francis applauds this ‘coming together’ because it encourages a certain equality; anyone can play hockey regardless of class, ethnicity, sex, etc. Mary Louise Adams (2006) is critical of this claim, and states that “if hockey is life in Canada, then life in Canada remains decidedly masculine and white” (71). All of Coboconk’s hockey players are white and masculine. This does not necessarily reflect any discriminatory tendencies as it represents the ethnic homogeneity of the town. As well, a girls’ hockey team did exist at the same time as did the boys’ team. Still, it does portray the typical image of Canada’s “authentic” hockey culture. Even though Coboconk, like Canada, has had female hockey teams, they do not seem to hold the same sense of entitlement or importance as the “pernicious sense of male entitlement: to space, to status, to national belonging” (Adams, 71). The girls’ team did not belong to the ORHA and when I asked my informants about it, they enthusiastically told me that Coboconk did have one, but could not provide any details or elaboration on this point. Having an all white-male hockey team provided Coboconk with the image of the ‘authentic’ rural Canadian town. It also promoted the same aggressive masculinity that has been associated with the frontier man, the lumber driver, the explorer, and the adventurer.

Adams suggests that hockey culture “contributes to idealized notions of manliness” (73),
which are also highlighted in the pioneer myth. The narrative of hockey “evoke[s] small-town and rural Canada—Canada at its whitest” (75), which gives ‘Coby’ a place and an identity with which to understand and assert itself. In essence, The Coboconk Memorial Arena represented the community and confirmed all of its values. Because of this it holds a special place in the hearts of those who remember it.

Conclusion

Suggitt exclaims that it is not her “intention to glorify misfortune, or poverty, or to regret the passing of pioneer days, but it is good to pause occasionally and remember that our comfort was brought by the sweat and perseverance of our ancestors” (292). From its inception, this project has been an attempt to find meaning in the changing character of Coboconk by remembering and historicizing its pioneer past. Local history helps people to “understand, and accept, how the political and social system under which they live came about, and how force and conflict have played, and continue to play, their part in that evolution” (Thompson, 3). The task of uncovering the history of a town structured around pioneer and settler values is sure to bring a sense of comfort and stability to the community. Though times change, traditional values can remain. This paper has explored how a concept such as the frontier myth has created the foundation for community building, and maintains relations of kinship and friendship in a small-town setting. The local mill and the hockey arena are only two of many structures that support this concept, but they are the ones considered most important for this specific community. These two places, and the myths they have espoused, have created a sense of
place and importance for Coboconk. The arena and the mill have confirmed frontier value systems and given them a justification. As this paper began with a poem from Suggitt’s book, so it will end with her primary message: “Here the early settlers endured the thorns of pioneer life and passed to their children a goodly heritage. The thorns were there but the roses also abundant” (293).
References


