

Jennie Bramwell

Spooky or what...?



Little four year old Jennie Bramwell arrived in Canada May 26, 1881. Jennie was brought by the Quarrier Orphan Homes of Scotland. She was taken by a reputable farm family, Robert Dawson and his wife Margaret nee Shier. They were an otherwise childless couple from Thorah, Ontario and happily accepted Jennie into their family, giving her their last name. The 1891 census shows Jennie living with the Dawson's as Jennie Dawson, their daughter. Also living with the family is William Shier, a maternal nephew.

All seemed well with the Dawson's until fourteen year old Jennie, in late 1891, became seriously ill with brain fever. She suffered convulsions after being administered morphine. Neighbours reported that Jennie suddenly went into a trance, and upon awakening, suddenly pointed up to the ceiling yelling "Look at that!". They were shocked to see the ceiling in flames! Nothing more was thought of this after the fire was extinguished until the next day when the very same thing happened. In fact, they reported, every day thereafter the same was repeated. Fires in the home mysteriously broke out, often when Jennie was in the home alone! No cause of these fires could be identified. Once, a photo hanging on the wall suddenly ignited and burned! Once thrown outside, any item that was burning would oddly extinguish. The family

finally called in help when a kitten suddenly burst into flames! Their home was in shambles, the walls were charred, the furniture burned and strewn about the yard.

According to the Bevearton, Ontario November 6, 1891 newspapers, the "Worlds Ghost Exterminator" was called in to investigate. They were introduced to Jennie, whom they found bright and intelligent. Despite a thorough investigation, no reasonable explanation for the fires could be found and they continued.

A reporter from the Toronto Globe called her 'a half-witted girl who had walked about the house with a match, setting light to everything she came across.' However, he had difficulty explaining how the fire on the ceiling, and those on the walls had been started. Finally by mid November, Jennie was returned to the Quarrier's Brockville Fairknowe Home. Once removed from the house, the fires stopped. The superintendent, Mr. Burgess, stated emphatically that Jennie had been with the Dawson's for nine years with no incidents and that he did not believe she had anything to do with the manifestations in their home.

Despite many theories which were forthcoming, none were proven positive and a reasonable explanation was never found for the fires. When Jennie's health returned, the fire staring phenomenon abated.

BHCARA NEWS

British Home Child Day: With many thanks to our outstanding volunteers and presenters, our second BHC Day was enjoyed by all!

Our key note speaker, Kenneth Bagnell, in a note sent to us said; *"Thanks to you Lori: it all went so well. I will always remember you and the day. As I mentioned at the end of the talk, you and others, have embodied the words of renowned scholar and child immigrant John Seeley: 'As far as the human hand can reach good people are still doing good things.' You and your friends are the example".*

John Seeley was featured in our [March 2015 Newsletter](#)

Now Available BHC Jewelry! Personalized bracelets, necklaces and key chains available in the [BHCARA online store](#)! Made by Beverley Schulz for our members, they are a personal and beautiful way to carry your BHC with you..



October Events:

• **October 18:** The Uxbridge Historical Society - Tea and Author Talk, 75 Mariette St. Uxbridge. Come enjoy a cup of tea, hear Lori Oschefski and have the opportunity to share your BHC story during an open mic.

October 22: The Etobicoke Historical Society, Montgomery's Inn, 4709 Dundas St West, Toronto.

Visit our [EVENTS PAGE](#) for details!

Councillor Rob Ford, Grandson of BHC Ernest Ford, has been invited to speak in Etobicoke, and will attend - subject to his health, so please join us in wishing him very best as he recovers. Ernest arrived in Canada in 1902, brought by the Middlemore Homes. He served valiantly for our country in the First World War.



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Now it is that time of year when with the summer long gone most of us settle down to the countdown to Christmas helped by a huge dollop of commercial hype.

Of course it was not always so.

October was that moment to become reflective on all that had gone before and particularly the success of the harvest which in all rural communities is vital.

So after the long back breaking work of getting the crops in there was a series of short events to mark its finish. These started with the "harvest home" when the last wagon full of the last crop of the year would be decorated and pulled back to the farm often with the women and young labourers sitting on the top singing and joking which was followed by the harvest supper when the farmer and his wife provided a special "supper" for all those who had helped and culminated with a festival of thanksgiving in the local church.

And I am reminded that many of those young people who were migrated from our towns and cities in Britain might well be just one or two generations away from those rural traditions and given the state of British agriculture and the levels of rural poverty some who made that long sea crossing to Canada will have been from a farming background.

The historian in me would like to explore those connections but for now I am also in reflective mood and have decided to wander over some at least of those rural past times which had been part of that country way of life.

Some were seasonal falling always at harvest time, Christmas or spring and Easter while others took place whenever the opportunity arose.

Of these "occasional ones" in our village the least pleasant was bull baiting when a bull was tethered to a post on the green and dogs were set on it with bets being taken as to the fate of the animals and along with badger baiting remained a popular sport till it was made illegal in the 1830s.

In the case of bull baiting given that there were two pubs facing each other across the green it was an activity encouraged by the pub landlords and fuelled by vast quantities of beer. Whatever the outcome to the bull the event was always marked by the odd dead or dying dog discarded in one of the nearby lanes by its owner.

Then there were the illegal prize fights which took place away from the village but within reach of the bridge across the river which marked the divide between two counties and offered an escape route across the county border where the Lancashire constabulary had no jurisdiction.

On a happier note there were the May songs when groups of men during that month would serenade young women at their bedroom window in the early hours.

But of all these activities it will be those associated with Easter and the church which were at the centre of village life.

During Easter there were the pace egging ceremonies when young men acted out the story of St George and the slaying of the Dragon which was performed around the township often at the doors of the wealthy and outside the local pubs, drawing crowds and donations.

Amongst the various characterisers was "Toss Pot" who dressed in women's clothing and armed with a set of hat pins collected "contributions" from the onlookers and woe betide those who were less than generous.

And during the same few days over Easter there were the games of "lifting" when men and women without warning would get behind total strangers and lift them for a lark all of which I guess was an echo of the resurrection.

Which neatly brings me to "Wakes" celebrated around the country on the birthday of the patron saint of the local parish church which began with the annual chore of sweeping out the old rushes from the church floor and laying fresh ones cut from the river bank and brought into the village on the rush cart which had been specially decorated for the event and would be pulled into the village by a gang of young men accompanied by a bunch of equally young women.

And with the rushes laid the rest of the day was given over to partying when according to tradition the doors were left open and anyone was welcome to cross the threshold.

Less pleasant were those traditions associated with the public humiliation of wrong doers of which "Riding the Stang" was the least pleasant. In slightly different forms it can be found across Europe dating back to the Middle Ages and in communities where there was little if any policing such activities were essential.

Sadly many of these rural pastimes had vanished or were already a pale imitation of what they had once been by the time the first young people were being migrated and within a decade were fast becoming the subject of local historians who roamed over the collective memories of that generation born at the beginning of the 19th century.

All of which brings me back to those young BHC migrants some of whom I guess experienced their first truly rural festivals on farms cross Canada, thousands of miles from home, which I suspect is one of those odd twists of history.

Visit Andrew's Blog at:

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Photos and credits:
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To the right:
Harvest 1890; Harvesting on the meadow land, 18990 from the Lloyd Collection

