

“HISTORY THAT ISN’T SO”

My title is a chapter heading from *Studies of the Niagara Frontier*, published in 1911 by the Buffalo Historical Society. In it author Frank H. Severance bemoans the errors that so often lurk in written history, errors that are heedlessly repeated by other writers who can’t be bothered to check the facts. Using Niagara Falls as an example, he cites many instances of “history that isn’t so,” and observes gloomily, “The spread of misinformation about Niagara began ... as soon as men began to write about the region, The first man usually means the first lie.”

Of course, Severance did not mean that historical errors only result from outright lying, but like the early writers who were the object of his criticism (and who never hesitated to bend the truth if it made for a better story), he may have felt that a bit of exaggeration was justified to get his point across.

I have to admit a lot of sympathy for Severance, for I too am a stickler when it comes to historical accuracy. Indeed, if you read Doug Herod’s column in *The Standard* on January 23 you will know that I am nothing less than a “fusspot,” and a “proud fusspot” at that. The topic of his column was the name of the bridge on DeCew Road just east of the DeCew House. Ontario Power Generation is transferring ownership to the City of Thorold, and for some reason the official documents refer to it as the Laura Secord Bridge.

When I first read this the fusspot in me took over and wrote a letter to *The Standard*, pointing out that the name made no sense. Laura Secord never went that way (she approached the DeCew House from the opposite direction), and even if she had there would have been no bridge, for the water channel beneath it was not created until about 1904.

There are enough historical errors floating around already without creating new ones, and I never cease to be amazed at how many there are (and how rapidly they proliferate and mutate now that we have the Internet). Since becoming a serious student of local history about a dozen years ago I have researched numerous topics, and have learned the hard way that I can never rely on secondary sources, no matter how authoritative they seem to be. I could devote a whole article to errors that I have come across, but two examples will suffice for now.

One is the claim that John Graves Simcoe, on his arrival in Niagara in 1792, changed the name from Niagara to Newark, and the other is the claim that the earliest settlers of St. Catharines in the 1780s were John Hainer and Jacob Dittrick. The first is simply wrong, and the second is attended by so

many qualifications, so many ifs and buts, as to be almost meaningless. (Regretfully, lack of space prevents me from discussing these any further, so I can only seek your forbearance as I move on.)

This is why, when doing my research, I not only use primary documentation whenever possible but also take full advantage of the knowledge of local historians such as Alex Ormston and John Burtiak. Both are amazing sources of information, references, suggestions and leads. John in particular plays a major role behind the scenes, meticulously editing successive drafts of my articles for content and style. Between us, we usually get things right.

Yet, despite all these precautions, errors do creep in (and if I am upset by historical errors in general, you can imagine how bad I feel about those I commit myself). Sometimes they are errors of commission, when I misinterpret the data or express myself unclearly, and sometimes they are errors of omission, when I fail to realise the significance of some piece of evidence or when relevant documents fail to arrive before the publication deadline. I flatter myself that the errors are rare and relatively minor, but there are a couple of recent exceptions that I must confess to.

The first, an error of commission, is in my September 2008 article on the evolution of St. Catharines as a municipality. The 1850 act that redefined the town limits did not extend the northern boundary all the way to Carlton Street as I stated, but only to a line midway between Welland Avenue and Carlton. I misread the boundary description in the act, though in my defence I should add that I was led astray by an error in the act itself (which is really ironic since the act was passed to correct errors in the previous act of 1849).

The second, an error of omission, is in my most recent article about Power Glen. A complete episode in the area’s history is missing — the story of the Grantham Navigation Company, incorporated in 1838 to canalize the Twelve Mile Creek from St. Catharines to the Escarpment. While it never came to anything, it does serve to clarify questions of mill ownership in the 1830s. Had I twigged to something Alex Ormston was saying this would have been in the article, but I failed to make the connection.

Suitably chagrined, I am working on expanded and corrected versions of both articles, and in due course I will provide copies to anyone interested.

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