

Memoirs of Pioneer Days in Ontario by Mary MacKenzie 1806-1880

I, Mary MacKenzie, born in Inverness, Scotland in the year of 1806. Ach! What delight it is for me to tell my children and grandchildren about my young days in Bonnie Scotland. But mind you I had to work as well as play for we were not rich people. When I was twenty-one, I married John Ross, a man twenty years my senior. John was forever talking about the new country across the ocean, called, Canada. The landlords owned most all the farms in Scotland and a man could never get much of a start. "They paid such low wages," said he.

After we were married four years we decided to leave our loved ones and go to this new land. With our two sons, Hugh, three years old, fair complexion, red curly hair and blue eyes, he resembled my people, while Charles, one year old, darker complexion, brown, curly hair and dark blue eyes resembled his father.

We sailed in the summer of 1832, the weather being fine all the way over. After land was sighted, the captain told us he thought it would be better to go farther inland. So up the St. Lawrence and into Lake Ontario we went, landing at a small settlement called Cobourg.

A few settlers were on the wharf and after our chests were put ashore, a rugged Irishman stepped up.

"My name is Mike O'Leary," said he, "And I was after thinking you would like help to get your chests to a sheltered spot. You know the settlers here don't want the people coming from boats in their houses, afraid of cholera, they are."

After he helped John to put the chests under a nice large oak tree, he stopped for a friendly talk.

"How long were you on the water," he asked?

"Four weeks and three days," replied John.

"Sure and that was a quick passage. When we came over we were well out to sea and the sails had to be lowered, our vessel bobbed around like a cork on water. Some of those big swells of waves I thought would swamp our boat. After patient waiting the storm subsided and the sails went up again and the vessel was once more on her way."

"I'll be getting on now," said Mike, "if I hear of a vacant cabin, I'll let you know."

We were left alone out in this vast country.

"I will prepare our evening meal. John go to the nearest house for hot water while I build a fire place with stones and get our oatmeal, tea and scones out of the chest."

He had a pitcher of milk along with the hot water and it wasn't long before we had our porridge and the tea made. While we ate John told me of a man he was talking to, Mr. Monroe, by name. He told me of a vacant cabin we might get, near where his sister lives, about seven miles from here. He wants to visit his sister, and family so will take the oxen and cart and take our chests and the children and you. That news gave us more courage and we prepared to get rest, rolling the children up in blankets we lay down ourselves one on either side of them. They were soon sound asleep but John or I

didn't sleep, we heard about Indians and wild animals in this country so we were going to be on guard.

Mr. Munroe came along early in the morning and we were soon on our way, the men walking beside the cart. The road through the bush was rough and the oxen made slow headway. We sighted the cabin in a clearance after six hours of travel.

"This is where the Neills live," said Mr. Munroe.

As we came nearer we could see the children at play, then they heard us coming and ran into the cabin. A woman came to the door watching us coming. All at once she started running towards us shouting, "It's Uncle Alex. It's Uncle Alex."

What a joyous meeting! They had not seen each other for a very long time. Mr. Munroe told his sister who we were and where we wanted to go. She asked us to stop there for dinner.

"Unhitch the oxen, Alex, and turn them into the pasture," Rory said to the oldest boy.

"Run and tell your father, Uncle Alex is here."

Then she started to prepare dinner visiting with me as she worked.

"We are getting along well, we have a cow, pigs, a yoke of oxen, carts and a plough but we have been in this country for five years."

The men were looking over Mr. Neill's cleared land. He had a good patch of potatoes and a piece of wheat and corn.

After a good hot dinner we started on our way to the log cabin which was to be our home. About one mile farther on we came upon it in the thick of the bush. It was warmly built of logs, grouted in between them. Inside a bunk was built in one corner, a table of rough boards in the centre with a fireplace on another side.

After unpacking our few dishes and taking the clothing out of the chests it made it more homelike. Mr. Monroe wanted to get back to his sister before dark for it was impossible to keep to the roadway at night and wild animals would be prowling around. We thanked him kindly for taking us to our abode and after we wished him a safe journey, he started.

We were alone again in Canada's wild country. John and I explored the woods around our cabin and found a spring of running water. He then found his axe in the chest and cut some dry limbs which were lying around while I got a pail of water and it was not long until a roaring fire was on and the tea kettle boiling.

With our cup of tea, dried scones and oat cakes we were ready to get our bunk prepared for night. A long box was found under the bunk, this would be the children's bed. Before we laid ourselves down to rest, John hunted out the book and read a psalm and offered up a prayer to the Almighty for his care over us.

There were no doctors nearer than Cobourg and I told Mrs. Neill about my being in attendance on maternity cases in Scotland. She got word to a neighbour about me. One dark night we were awakened by a loud knocking on the door.

"Who's there," John asked?

"It's William McLeod," said the man, "from over country some two miles away. My wife is expecting a little one and would like Mrs. Ross to come to her."

I got up, dressed and went with the man, guided by the light from his lantern through those two miles of wild woods. We didn't get there any too soon. By daylight a fine baby boy was born to gladden their home. That was the start of my going as midwife but I told the expectant others to give me more notice so that I could leave victuals prepared for John and the children. With the small change I asked it helped us to live.

John was busy clearing around our cabin, getting a plot ready to spade for potatoes in the spring. A neighbour noticed he had several short cuts of cedar logs.

"Mr. Ross," said he, "you want to lay those aside and in the winter make sap troughs and spiles ready for the run of sap in the spring."

Then he told him how to make maple syrup. We were quite taken aback that there was so much work about it, because in Scotland they thought maple trees ran syrup when they were tapped. However, we borrowed an iron kettle and tapped the maple trees in the spring, boiling the sap outside, although it was dark and smoky tasting. We thought it a great treat. The boys often said when they were grown up that there never was a snack that tasted better than a piece of bread and butter with maple sugar spread on top. The boys were growing like bad weeds, John teaching them to read and write as there was no school closer than Cobourg.

Willing hands will always find work and so it was with me. Neighbouring women had more work than they could manage and they often sent for me to help. One time I was asked to churn and work up butter. All that I got for my pay was a small pail of butter milk. On my way home I sat down on a log and had a good cry but I think her conscience checked her because the next time I went she gave me some butter along with the butter milk to take home.

Four years after coming to the country my little daughter, Margaret, was born. She resembled her father more than she resembled me. The boys helped care for her so that I could get on with my work. The land was being cleared more each year, the men having bees in the summer, rolling the large logs in piles and burning them while the women helped prepare the dinner for a lot of hungry men. We had earned enough to buy a pair of little pigs and when they were about six months old we traded them with a farmer for a milking cow. Wasn't it nice to have our butter and milk now?

Coming home one day I told John that neighbour Stuart wanted to know if we would take a field of hay to cut on shares.

"Yes, it will come in good for our cow in the winter," said John.

At it we went John and I cutting with scythes while the boys with hand rakes put it up in small windrows to be left to dry for a day before we put it in coils. John then took a field of wheat on shares, he cutting with cradle, the boys raking while I tied their bundles into sheaves.

After leaving it for some time in stooks, John told us it was ready to be threshed out now. Laying some boards on a level piece of ground and spreading the sheaves out, he flailed the grain out.

"Mary, I am taking the wheat to Baltimore today." John said.

Next morning away he went with the bag of wheat on his shoulder getting back in the afternoon with his flour.

The next spring, Mr. Graham came over to ask John if he would take the job shearing his sheep on share for wool.

"That would be a good offer," said I, "then we would make warm clothing."

So we took the job. After the wool was washed it was taken to the carding mill to be made into rolls. Then I spun some of these rolls into yarn and dyed some of them with sumach dye for our dresses and shirts for John and the boys.

After laying yarn away for socks and stockings the rest went to the weavers to be made into full cloth for men's suits and flannel was made from my dyed yarn for dresses for Maggie and me and shirts for John and the boys.

"Mother, can you make our suits," asked Hugh. "Yes, my boy I learned to sew at school in Scotland."

Cutting out patterns I was ready to sew when the cloth came back with Maggie's help. Maggie was also able to knit and used to take pride in knitting socks and mitts for her father and brothers.

Hugh and Charles were helping the farmers now and it was not long before they earned enough to buy a team of horses, harness and a wagon and we quite often made the trip into Cobourg. One day on our way coming home, Hugh told us of a job he and John could get drawing goods around to different small towns when it came in on the boat but he said they would have to be near their work. They both talked it over and thought they might try it.

They went the next day to look for a house and came home telling of one they could get for low rent, a lovely, large brick house but the people around said it was haunted.

"It will not bother us," their father said, "we have done no harm."

In a few days we moved, but before we got unloaded a neighbour, Mrs. O'Toole came over to tell us about the ghost. By the time she finished her story the men had the load off, laughing at Mrs. O'Toole and her ghost story. We scrubbed the house all through. There was one room on the third storey which had a dark stain on the floor. I took ashes and soap trying to scour it off but it was of no use it did not disappear. We were there some time when one night we were awakened by light footsteps going upstairs to the third storey then lively dance music started. When the waltzing feet made so much noise overhead John would get up and light the candle and taking his cane knock on the ceiling shouting, be quiet up there. Then he would take down his bible and read to us. Finally a blood curdling scream rent the air and the dancing feet came pell-mell down the stairs, then all was silence again. It happens on the same night every year according to what Mrs. O'Toole had said. This event did not frighten us away but before the next winter the boys were tired of teaming and wanted to farm.

Going to the land agents they decided to look at a farm in Brighton Township about forty miles east of us. It suited them well and they made terms with a money lender to take

up the mortgage with interest at 10%. Quite an under-taking, I would say, and their father was old but they were just in their prime.

Charles often used to tell me, "I just try to tire myself out but it's no use. I don't know what it feels like."

And this was often said after his working from morning till night.

Hugh was always a good business head and always wanted to get ahead financially. Not long after we had settled on the new farm he informed us he was going to get married and wanted to go on another farm he liked better. So we had to borrow money to pay him off.

We did not correspond much with our folks in Scotland for it cost a shilling to send a letter and money was scarce.

However, John came home from the post office one day saying, "Mother I got a letter for you from Scotland."

All work was stopped as he read the letter. It was from my widowed sister's oldest boy, James, saying he was coming to Canada and would write again when he landed at Montreal. We anxiously looked for that letter to come.

After four weeks waiting, the letter came saying he was writing from Montreal. The date showed he would be in Brighton the following day. Charles being a lover of good horses was up early in the morning giving them extra grooming then hitching them to the democrat and away he went to meet James. Toward evening we saw them coming and we had supper ready for them. I had no need to look twice at him to know he was Margaret Anne's boy, he was so much like her. It was in the small hours of the morning before we ever thought of going to bed with so many questions to ask him about all the folks back home and him telling of the large steamboat he came on.

"Why Aunt, it couldn't get up your narrow river the St. Lawrence."

James was a blacksmith by trade. After he was rested he wanted to know where he would start up business. After looking around he decided upon a place four miles east of us at Codrington. It was a good farming community, therefore there would be plenty of horses worked.

"James," said I, "You're welcome to your board and lodging until you get a start."

"Thank you, Aunt," said he, "I will be glad to accept your offer."

Walking back and forth to Codrington he soon found short cuts through the fields and woods. Charles noticed James' boots were worn out so off came his new pair to change with him. They thought a lot of each other these cousins and it could be said of Charles that he could have climbed a good deal higher if he hadn't been always turning around to help somebody else up.

James got along well and when winter set in he bought a house near his shop making payments on it every month. He would come up to our place every Sabbath morning to go to church with us.

"Auntie," he said, one day, towards spring, "I have written to my sister, Marion, to come over this summer and keep house for me, and I just got word back to say she will come."

"I am glad to hear that James," I said. "After working hard all day you need a substantial meal."

True to her word, Marion came the next summer and a bonnie lass she was.

We had our own hard luck that summer. Charles while shearing sheep met with an accident; the sharp point of the shears piercing his knee so deep the joint water ran out. It began to swell and he suffered great pain. The doctor lanced it several times but it was no better. Another doctor was called in and the two decided the limb would have to come off.

A neighbour, a Mr. Harnden, heard of this and sent for a special doctor of his from Brighton a Dr. Ledster. Just as the other doctors had their instruments on the table ready to start, up drove Dr. Ledster. On examining the knee he told the other doctors just where to lance and with good results. Charles asked in a weak voice if the doctors thought his leg would have to come off.

"Oh, no" said Dr. Ledster.

"That gives me courage," said Charles. "I believe I can get up and walk"

We had to hire help in Charles' place. Maggie and I working out in the fields too. She was a strong lass and it was her delight to cut out around the man working in front of her, coming in first with her swath. She took her place on the wagon when drawing in to the barn and the man taking away at the window would have to work hard to keep from being buried in the hay. Charles gradually picked up strength and that winter was able to draw cordwood into the village of Warkworth to pay for his doctor bills. The hogs fattening were killed in the cool weather, two being kept for our meat for the year.

Charles came in one afternoon in late autumn saying, "I am going across to see James and Marion."

"Mind not to be late in coming home," said his father.

"No" said he, and away he went.

In the afternoon it clouded over and at four o'clock it was dark. I knew John was worried so I went to the door to listen every five minutes or so. At last in he walked a sorry sight, black soot from head to toe.

"What happened," we said in the same breath.

"Wait until I get my breath to tell you," said Charles.

"Dark settled down so quick when I got in the woods it was as black as night. When I was about half way through the woods I heard a movement over my head and upon looking up I saw two balls of light. I knew right away that it was a wild cat and I had been told never to turn my back to run away or they would spring upon you. With my eyes glued on those balls of fire I started slowly to back away. Once I stepped on a dry limb which cracked like a pistol. I thought all the trees were falling on me, then I realized the noise had disturbed the crows in the tree tops but it didn't scare the wild cat, it kept

about the same distance from me. I stepped on a stronger limb and reaching down slowly picked it up, never taking my eyes off those glaring ones. With this stick in my hand more courage came to me. At last I was out in the clearing and my pursuer turned away with angry yowls. I turned like a flash running into half burned trees which halted my speed for a second but I never let up running until I saw the light of home, and here I am safe and sound."

At family worship that evening we thanked the Lord for sparing our boy's life.

Marion and James announced one Sunday on their weekly visit that I would soon be seeing my sister.

"Are you daft?" said I.

"Not much, unless it is with overjoy," said Marion. "Yes, we expect mother, brother and sister to come next summer."

"It is almost too good to be true, I never expected to see my sister again," I told them.

However, James coming up early one June morning told us they were to arrive in Brighton the next day and asked Charles if he would go to meet them.

"Sure I will," said Charles.

So hitching his horses to the democrat, away he went next morning bringing the family all home with him. I was at some work outside when they arrived. Seeing me coming to the house they told their mother to hide to give me the impression she failed to come. After giving my new niece and nephew a hearty welcome I looked around for Margaret Anne. They could not keep from laughing and out she jumped from behind the door and we were locked in each other arms.

"Mary, I never would have known you," said my sister.

It was no wonder. I had grown so course and tanned. She had not changed much, refined and kind to both old and young. My grandchildren called her Auntie-Grandma.

Log schools were being built through the country which served as a place of worship on Sunday's. The teacher's salary was about seventy-five dollars and they boarded around with the families in the section. Alex Anderson was the new teacher when coming to our place to board he brought his violin along. The neighbours came in the evening to hear the music and have a dance. I could see Maggie and the teacher were greatly taken up with each other. Maybe I was selfish but I didn't want Maggie to get married. She thought if she married a teacher she wouldn't have to work so hard.

While I was at the barn one day up drove Alex with a fine horse and cutter, robe hanging over the back of the seat and another over his knees. Maggie must have known he was coming for she was ready to step in. Like a flash it came to me they were off to be married. I ran from the barn to stop her but the horse was too fast for me. I was just in time to catch the flying robe. I hung on to this until it came loose and I fell in the snow crying with disappointment. She came back that afternoon telling me she was married. What could I say then; I didn't want to hold a grudge against my only daughter.

Alex kept on teaching for several years then he bought a small farm near ours. Charles was not long after Maggie getting married. He met a pretty girl at Hughes and after a

short courtship brought his bride home in June 1863. An addition was built to the house so we each had our own rooms.

My husband was eighty-three years old now and I could see he was failing. In the following March he passed peacefully away. My grandchildren were arriving and I was kept busy between three families and they had sorrow as well as joy.

Hugh and his wife were married ten years when she died very suddenly leaving four small children. I went with them for a year. He then married again and I came home. Maggie was the next to have children and I went when her twin daughters were born. Charles' wife's turn was next. In the spring she had a fine baby boy whom she called James.

At the time of the Fenian Raid we got a terrible scare. The men were away to the shanty and the women were left alone. A neighbour, Miranda Dingman came in to borrow some yeast to set bread.

"Have you heard the news?" she said. "The Fenians have crossed the border and will soon be invading our homes, coming nearer and nearer.

"That's them coming now," said she. We all huddled in one small bedroom but to our delight they went on.

"I'm not going home tonight," Miranda said.

We laid crosswise in the bed so as to be all in one room. At midnight we heard someone at the door and starting to walk across the floor. A great jingle of bells brought Miranda to her feet just as the intruder struck a match to see what he had stumbled over. To our surprise there stood Charles home from the shanty.

"What's going on here," he asked, seeing me in a dead faint and the other women looking like ghosts.

As they gazed at the floor, there lay the string of bells with which the baby had been playing. They told him about the Fenians and that they had just gone by with loud screeching. Charles began to laugh. "I heard that too, neighbour Wells bought a new wagon and there being no grease on the axel of the wheels, it caused them to heat and that made the screeching noise every time the wheel turned."

Peace was restored. After a while Miranda was accompanied home by Charles.

I have been asked why it is that Scotch people enjoy old age. I don't know unless the pleasures of their young days are so impressed on their mind that they cannot bear to part with them.

I have written of some of my joys and my sorrows and I hope that some of my descendants in years to come will pick up this story and share my memories with their children.

*And now,
I'm wearin' awa like sna' wreathes in tha'
I'm wearin' awa to the land o the Seal,
There's no sorrow there, there's neither cauld or care
And the day aye fair. In the land o the Seal.*

Mary MacKenzie Ross

Source: The story was handed down by Mary MacKenzie Ross and assembled by Charlotte Ross, her granddaughter (daughter of Charles); much later Charlotte's grandnephew Jim Potter revised and edited the material for distribution to the many descendants.

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