

THE SCANDAL THAT ROCKED ROCKPORT

By Lorraine Payette

Did you hear? The richest man in town married a woman nearly 40 years his junior just 2 ½ months after the death of his first wife. Less than two years later, he died, disinheriting his family and leaving her his entire estate. A trial ensued to try to undo the will, but in the end, she won everything...

Welcome to Rockport, Ontario, in 1907. Charles Cornwall is a very influential member of society. Owner and operator of the general store, he ran for office and sat on council for 20 years, eventually becoming Reeve, as well as being a notary public. He owned much of the land in the area and parcels on several islands, as well as being a major employer in Rockport. He and his family were well known throughout the area, and Charles amassed an incredible amount of wealth.

"Charles Cornwall was a very busy man, the founder of Rockport, one of my few heroes of

Rockport," said Brian Phillips Local Historian of Rockport. "He owned all of Cornwall's Point, plus bits of land all over the islands and right over onto the American side. He gained a lot of his wealth through real estate transactions, which he was doing in the background along with a lot of his other businesses."

In 1848, Cornwall married his first wife, Mary Anne Dollinger. Although they had a happy relationship, time takes its toll, and in their twilight years, her niece, Louise Bush Griffin and her son, James Driscoll Griffin, moved into the house where Louise looked after the aging couple. When Mary Anne died in 1905, Louise

married Charles and stayed on with him until his death in 1907. Throughout their marriage, she is mentioned as still referring to him as "Uncle Charles".

When they took their vows, Charles was 81 while his bride was a mere child of 42. Only a month after the death of his first wife, Charles conveyed all of his real property to Louise. Six weeks after their marriage, he changed his will to leave her everything. Although they married in 1905, the marriage wasn't registered until May of 1907, several months after his death.

Charles' nephews, the Cornwall brothers, were livid. They immediately went to court, trying to overturn the will and get rid of the usurper. It was irrelevant that collectively they owed their uncle \$30,000 (a small fortune at that time), and that none of them had made any effort to return this money to Charles. They wanted the rest of what he had as well, an estate valued at \$100,000 – equivalent to about \$2.5 million in today's money.

"The newspapers recorded the trial as 'The largest of its kind ever held in Brockville' and that officials feared the courthouse floor would collapse unless they restricted entry," said Phillips.

The Cornwalls' house is now Cornwall's Pub, and the general store that he ran is still in existence as the Boathouse Country Inn. Signs of the Cornwall's can be found throughout the community. Louise went out of her way to make sure that all that Charles had established remained in good running order for future generations to enjoy and to guarantee that Rockport continued to benefit in other ways as well.

"The trial ended on the 17th of January, 1908," said Phillips. "I have tried to attain the transcript of that trial, tried very hard, but I've not been able to do that. I tried through the Brockville court system and through the Ontario archives. I've come up with some legal documents, but never the transcript. That transcript would be absolutely fascinating, to be able to read all the true details of what happened in that courtroom and see how people felt. At the same time, you'd be learning a tremendous amount about what Rockport was like at that time." LH

Charles Cornwall and his wives



To learn more about this scandal from the last century, contact Brian Phillips at brian.phillips@outcraft.ca.