

THE QUAKERS:

An Intriguing Part of Our Local History

By Sally Smid

The Quaker Cemetery, which was established in 1831, on what is now Main St. East in Athens, has attracted much interest and curiosity over the years. "The Society of Friends" first met in the cooper shop of Gershom Wing until a meeting house was built in 1938, then the only one in Leeds County. It was located across the road from this graveyard. Quaker members entered through two front doors, one for men and one for women who sat separately for the services. Adherents dressed very plainly, the ladies in long, gray, high-necked dresses and the men in plain black suits and wide-brimmed hats. "Thee and thou" and "brother and sister" permeated their daily conversations. A married couple named Robeson for instance, would formally refer to each other as "Mr. Robeson" and "Mrs. Robeson". Quakers first settled in what is now southern Ontario and by 1860 they numbered over 7000.

It has been said that the name Quaker may have involved founder James Fox, who told an English magistrate to "tremble at the name of God". Others say it came from the physical shaking that occurred during Quaker religious experiences. The group had no minister but any "Brother or Sister" could speak at a meeting "if the spirit so moved them". Sometimes meetings lasted hours in quiet prayer and meditation, but those in attendance say they "came home refreshed".

An old hand-written 1833 record book reveals the details of Quaker meetings at Yonge, later called Farmersville, then Athens. It was found in an old trunk in the attic of an Athens home formerly owned by Quakers Arza and Sarah Wiltse on Sarah St, once the site of the local hospital. Historian Harry Blanchard wrote about some of the book's contents, the book being placed in the library of the Univ. of Western Ontario. There were strict warnings about sleeping during required meetings. Love and unity were to be maintained "as becomes brethren" and "talebearing" was discouraged. Children were to be trained to maintain "plain speech, behaviour and apparel". They were also to be instructed in a "religious life consistent with their Christian profession". Adherents were to "avoid the use of distilled, spirituous liquors unless medicinal" and to keep their promises, pay all debts, and avoid military or government involvement. The Friends took a lead in abolishing slavery. They were discouraged from socializing outside of their society to help deter marriages apart from their church. When two members decided to wed, the meeting had to agree that there were no "impediments". The couple simply exchanged their vows before the assembly. A committee of two male members would then accompany the bridal couple to their first house and would later report back about

the marriage being an "accomplished fact". There were no recorded divorces, desertions or marital disagreements.

At one point their meetings moved into the Methodist church, or what is now the United Church. In the late 1880s the denomination in Farmersville ceased to exist as many older members passed away and a lot of their offspring did marry into other denominations. The old Quaker meeting house was used in 1887 as a bunk house during the B & W railway construction and also for storage by farmer John Layng. Arza Sherman, a Quaker descendant, moved it later to his Mineral Springs south of Joseph Street. He'd hoped that it could be used as a church for anyone who might be disenchanted with other area religious groups. It was used to house livestock for a time and was later torn down.

All that physically remains today is the Quaker Cemetery, which stands as a memorial to these local Quakers. Few stones remain standing and most are unreadable. These have been an important source of early records. The graveyard was somewhat restored and kept up by community volunteers. Today the Township of Athens is seeing that this valuable part of our local history is being valued and maintained. **LH**



Right: A gravestone in the Quaker Cemetery of Eliza Derbyshire as it appeared years ago. The dates are typical to the way these were recorded. It seems that at least 4 of her infant children are also buried in this grave site. Courtesy of Athens Museum.



The Quaker Cemetery as it appears on Athens' Main Street East today.