

THE RISE & FALL OF SHEATOWN

By Sally Smid

Like many early communities, Sheatown was once a thriving place. Moss-covered foundations surrounded by underbrush and deteriorated roadways are all that remain now. Author and historian Paul Cote of Gananoque recently released a book that chronicles the rise and fall of this Irish Catholic Community which thrived for 100 years. In 329 pages he details much of the larger histories of what is now part of Athens Township and the Front of Yonge Township in Leeds County. Cote's extensive study of early records is remarkable and his indexes and maps are quite comprehensive. The book is a true testament to his passion for first hand research and local history which began with his personal family research projects. Cote does a very commendable job in uncovering much local history which was quite unknown and not included in other publications.

The abandoned road, which now draws adventuresome four wheelers, once connected Caintown to Charleston, was a busy commercial hub and a vital link between the townships. Because of all the many Irish Catholic settlers in the area, Sheatown became the site of the only rural catholic school. The large catholic population resulted in the creation of the St James Parish in Ballycanoe, which was the heart of the community. Cote's book tells of Sheatown's "rise and fall" and includes local family names such as Shea, Leeder, Slack, Cox, and Flood to name just a few. It also includes local roads, the post office, an inn, mills, a cheese factory and more. Cote describes the book as "somewhat of a metaphor for the changes in Leeds County from the days of

early settlers until our modern age". It also draws upon the larger history of the Front of Yonge and Rear Townships, and shows the vital importance of the only road between them for 50 years, which was probably the reason for Sheatown's existence. It examines the long-abolished road labour laws. While it was not good farming country, the road allowed access and was a hope for further development and economic progress. Many early settlers who came to Ontario had similar experiences and their early communities ceased to exist for the same reasons.

As the 1800s progressed, the population peaked, and industrialization drew many away from the poor farming land around Sheatown. Milling and cheese making became more modern and centralized. With the arrival of the railway, the completion of County Road 5, and the automobile, more goods could be easily transported. Travel to employment was also made a lot easier. This was compounded however, by the challenges of the Depression as many moved away to make a better living.

The "Golden Age" of Sheatown from the 1870s to the early 1900s, came to an end, marking a decline in agriculture in large parts of Leeds County. Passing through Sheatown today it is difficult to imagine that this was once the place where homes, farms, and businesses existed and the forests have returned.

Cote's book truly captures the essence of the Sheatown community and overflows with much valuable local history. It can still be purchased at the Village Store and Museum in Athens and at the Mallory Coach House. **LH**

Top Left: This is a map showing the location of the once booming settlement of Sheatown.

Left: Semi-retired archaeologist Peter Rowsome measures the remains of a Sheatown basement on the Keyes property.

Right: Historian and author Paul Cote recently released his book about Sheatown after several years of extensive research.

