

Seaforth

Much of the information in this gallery can be found in *Seaforth Beginnings* by Dean Robinson or was contained in articles by Mrs. Belle Campbell, for many years a chronicler of Seaforth's history. Special mention should be made of the McLean and Sills collections - the source of many photos of scenes past. Material also came from *The Huron Expositor* and references mentioned in the opening section.

The Early Years



The present town of Seaforth owes its rise from a muddy crossroads to a thriving community to several individuals who risked their capital on a potential unseen by others. The area was known as Guide Board Swamp in pioneer days.

The first settler in the area was Andrew Steen who, in the early 1840s, cleared a plot on what is now the southeast corner of Main Street and the Huron Road (now Goderich Street or Hwy 8) and erected a cabin. The second notable land transaction was part of ten acres cleared by a speculator named McGregor. On it, Irishman Andrew McKernan purchased three acres for a log home, tavern and a grocery store.

The remaining portion of the McGregor land was later purchased by Christopher Sparling, who with his brother George, owned land in the area including lots at the four corners. Christopher Sparling convinced the Buffalo, Brantford and Goderich Railway to run a line through his property on the south side of the present town. In 1856, one year before the line reached Goderich, George Sparling had his land surveyed into town lots. The news that the railway was coming attracted three lawyers (Patton, Bernard and Lefroy) from more settled parts of Ontario and they purchased the McGregor land from Christopher Sparling and laid out a village in 1854-55.

To ensure the success of their investment, the trio offered the railway land for a station. The company accepted on the condition that they got a station building as well. Seaforth and Egmondville merchants quickly financed the required construction.

With the Huron Road at the north end of town and the rail station at the south, Seaforth's success was ensured. About the same time, a northward road to Grey Twp had been cut. The village's success was further solidified when James Dickson, the local Member of Parliament, had the south end of that road into the recently opened Grey Twp moved from the rival village of Harpurhey to the Seaforth main street about 1859.

It is interesting to speculate whether the fact that Patton, a driving force in the development, was a partner in the firm of Sir John A. Macdonald had anything to do with the successful maneuvers which brought the road and the railway to town.



Merchants and professional people from the villages of Egmondville and Harpurhey rapidly moved to the new centre and by the early 1860s the town could proudly boast of having a doctor, blacksmith, three hotels, a post office, wagon maker, several retail establishments and successful firms engaged in the building trades and the buying and selling of grain.



The importance of the grain trade continued for many years. At one time several firms were handling over a million dollars of wheat each season and Seaforth was considered the busiest terminus in the province. As would be expected, milling was an important industry and the firm of Beattie & Armitage shipped 15,000 bags of oatmeal to Great Britain in 1878. The oats were shipped in from as far as the United States and manufactured in local mills.

On January 1, 1868, Seaforth was incorporated as a village with a population of 1,056. As well, an area of 400 acres were drawn from Tuckersmith and McKillop Townships in the south and north.

On the heels of their new status came a new industry. Salt was discovered southeast of the junction of the railway and Main Street. The first salt works was built on the property of a pair of Doctors, T.T. Coleman and W.C. Gouinlock. Their operation called the Seaforth Salt Works became the largest in town although several others, most notably the Eclipse works and the Merchant Salt Co. all produced substantial quantities. The Seaforth Salt Works survived the longest, operating into the 20th century under Dr. Coleman's sons, Thomas F. and Edward with the name changed to Coleman Estate. All vestiges of the salt works are now gone; they were located to the north-west of the rail crossing on Main Street.

The need for vast quantities of wood to fuel the fires needed to evaporate the salt brine was always a concern. In 1907, fire became a nemesis of another sort when a fire at the Coleman works brought the salt boom to a close.

The salt industry, added to the grain trade, meant economic boom-times for the village. On January 1, 1875, it became an incorporated town of 2,060 people and added 100 acres from McKillop and 50 acres from Tuckersmith to its area.

The Great Fire and Rise from the Ashes

The boom brought with it a problem that bedeviled many Ontario towns. Hastily constructed frame buildings, little fire fighting equipment and inadequate water supplies were a recipe for disaster. In September 1875, fire broke out in a business operated by a Mrs. Griffith and before it was done 12 acres of the business district were a smoldering ruin. In all, 22 businesses and 9 residences fell victim to the flames.



The total loss was estimated at more than \$100,000 of which approximately a third was covered by insurance. Interestingly, Mrs. Griffith had recently taken out more than sufficient insurance and although no official cause was recorded suspicion abounded that the blaze was the result of an insurance policy rubbing against the rent. Mrs. Belle Campbell, for many years Seaforth's unofficial historian,

indicated that locals were ready to tar and feather Mrs. Griffiths on her return from the Goderich court after an unsuccessful attempt to convict her of arson. The lady apparently thought better of returning to live in Seaforth and disappeared from the town's history for good.



The community's economic strength proved sufficient to rebuild the downtown. Within two years, Main Street was lined with many of the brick structures still in use today. Beginning in 1977, Seaforth residents and businesses had many of these structures and local residences designated under The Ontario Heritage Act. The downtown core was designated a Heritage Conservation District in 1984. These actions preserved the spectacular Victorian buildings for future generations to admire.

One of the most interesting buildings in the downtown area is the Cardno Block finished in 1877 for Alex Cardno, a Scottish immigrant who arrived in Canada in 1852. Dominated by the tower containing a four-faced clock, the building originally contained five stores at street level above which was the Cardno Music and Concert Hall. When built the structure cost \$30,000, and the purchase and installation of the clock added another \$2,000.

For years, the hall was the leading centre for the arts in Seaforth featuring everything from minstrel shows to local entertainers. In the 1920's, the Murless Players held forth under the direction of Mrs. Murless Jones. The First World War saw several patriotic 'Victory' concerts. Several of these were led by Grace McFall (banker James G. Mullen's wife) whose voice had been acclaimed in New York when she sang with the Frances Wilson Opera Company at the turn of the century.



Seaforth's musical traditions are deeply rooted with a number of bands past and present playing significant roles in the area's cultural life.

In 1862, a voluntary infantry company was established called No 3 Company, 33rd Battalion. This organization existed until the First World War and featured its own marching band made up of men and boys from the community. During the war, many members served with the 161st Battalion Band.

In 1924, a more famous band came into existence when the citizens' band purchased used McKenzie-Seaforth tartan military kilts and proclaimed themselves the Seaforth Highlanders. This organization was active until the 1960s when they amalgamated with the Dashwood band.



The now closed Seaforth District Collegiate Institute has in recent years produced award winning brass bands. Originally containing both boys and girls, the band has become an all girls band. In 2004, it was asked to lead an opening parade at Disney World in Florida. The band has performed regularly in parades around Ontario and has also journeyed to Europe.

A Champion Town



The sporting life has always been prominent in Seaforth with familiar sports such as hockey, baseball and soccer occupying citizens' attention along with lawn bowling, curling, lacrosse and horse racing. Although the town no longer has its own lacrosse team, the others are going strong with the curling club being one of the longest continuously operating clubs in Ontario. Broomball has

recently developed an enthusiastic following with local teams having success against area rivals.

In 1891, the town's phenomenal sports record received North American acclaim with an article in the October 3 1891 issue of the Illustrated Buffalo Express. Under the banner A CHAMPION TOWN the express recorded the following: "As a general rule, most towns and cities can boast of something in advance of the rest; but Seaforth boasts of being the greatest sporting town in Canada, and rightly too, as it now has the champion fireman of the world, champion foot-ballers of Canada, champion collegiate institute foot-ballers of Ontario, champion senior lacrossists of the Southern District, champion junior lacrossists of the Western District, and also two juvenile champion clubs of the town, viz.: Maple Leafs Football Club and the Scots Lacrosse Club. Even among the Juveniles, the Maple Leafs (football) and Scots (lacrosse) are the Canadian champions. The article also notes that the town supported both active cricket and gun clubs.



Several local residents have achieved international sports stardom. Lloyd Eisler, with his partner Isabel Brasseur, won the Canadian Pairs figure skating title on several occasions in the 90s. During that time, the pair won two Olympic bronze medals in '92 and '94 and were first, second or third five times at the 'worlds' including winning the world championship in 1993.

Seaforth players have also been active in the NHL with two gaining Stanley Cup success over the years. Most recently, Boyd Devereaux hoisted the Cup with the 2002 Detroit Red Wings. The Seaforth native had originally been a first round draft choice of the Edmonton Oilers. Much earlier in the 20th century, another product of Seaforth hockey, Henry (Cooney) Weiland was instrumental in the Boston Bruins winning their first three Stanley Cups. Weiland grew up in Egmondville, playing on the Bayfield River. His minor hockey was played in Seaforth and then in Owen Sound prior to playing professionally in the minor leagues in the United States.

In 1929, 'Cooney' joined the Bruins and was instrumental in their first Stanley Cup success achieved in that year. In his last year in the league, he was again with Boston and achieved a second Cup win in 1939. Another triumph came in 1941 when he coached the team to a third Stanley Cup. He went on to coach in the American League and ended his hockey career after several years as the coach of the Harvard University hockey team in 1971. In that year, Weiland was elected to the hockey hall of fame.

Soccer in Seaforth has a long history and a strange connection to politics. Teams, often named the Seaforth Hurons, have won titles as far back as 1890 when they were the Western Ontario champions. In 1891 and 1905, they topped the Western Football Association and were Canadian senior champs.

The connection with politics results from the Seaforth Collegiate Institute team, which in 1897 captured the Hough Cup. One of its members was a young William Aberhart who was to have a profound effect on western Canadian political life. Aberhart was also a member of the Seaforth Golf Club.



Aberhart left Seaforth for Alberta in 1910. Settling in Calgary, he was a teacher and principal from 1915 to 1935. A strong fundamentalist Aberhart began a regular religious broadcast in 1925 that made his name a household word on the prairies. The dirty 30's were a period economic hardship and political upheaval. Aberhart became convinced of the need for economic reform and adopted the theories of the Social Credit movement. In 1935, he established the Social Credit Party of Alberta and went on to win the election that same year. He remained premier until his death in 1943.



Perhaps the most unusual title held by a Seaforth team fell to the Seaforth Fire Brigade. In 1888 at a competition in Sarnia, they captured the international hose reel championship in a world record time of 55.5 seconds (or 56.5 according to another account). In 1889, they repeated the feat, involving the coupling together of 300 feet of hose contained on a cart pulled by a crew of 18, at a

competition in Mount Clemens, Michigan.

Although primarily used as a training facility, the harness racing oval on the Seaforth Fairgrounds provides silent testimony to the former importance of standard bred racing to the rural community. It was not unusual for prominent locals to have a horse or two running at meets usually held in conjunction with the fall fair. It must be said, however, that the prize money was often not large and the primary reward involved bragging rights for the next year.



The original agricultural exhibits building still stands surrounded by the pavement of the Seaforth and District Community Centre parking lot and is used each autumn during the Seaforth Fall Fair. A modern exhibit building called the Agriplex has been constructed inside the racing oval. The nearby hexagonal agri-exhibit building of frame construction is a rarity dating from the 1880s and is still in use today.



Where We Gathered

Public buildings play a large part in the life of a rural community and Seaforth has had the good luck and good judgment to maintain many of its historic public places. The Huron East Town Hall originally served Seaforth and was erected in 1894. The red brick building became necessary when the town offices and everything they contained went up in flames when fire destroyed the market building at Market and Jarvis Streets in 1891. Interestingly, this structure had been constructed in the middle of the road at the junction of the two streets.



Unfortunately Seaforth's champion hose reel company lost all its equipment at the same time since the building housed the fire equipment as well.

After considerable debate about the location of the new building and the cost of two stories as opposed to three, the contract for the present red brick structure was awarded to Young and Causey, a firm from Stratford. The final price was approximately \$10,000. A small addition was added in 1955 for a police station and the building was extensively remodeled in 1957 and again in 2000 when Huron East came into existence.

Of Seaforth's many hotels (the 1875 council minutes record ten hotel and tavern licenses being issued) only three remain - the Commercial Hotel, now vacant, situated beside the Town Hall on Main Street, Dick House, now apartments, on Main Street and The Queens, now Hurley's Celtic Inn, on the northeast corner of Main and Huron Road, now Goderich St. or Hwy 8.



The Commercial was constructed by Thomas Knox in 1866. It burned in April of 1895 and was rebuilt and reopened by the then owner, Alex Davidson, in October of the same year. The building has been vacant for some time and is available for development. The Queen's Hotel, now Hurley's, was officially opened in 1877 after a predecessor burned in the fire of 1876. It was owned by a local grain buyer, Thomas Stephens, who had also run a pork packaging operation in the area. He purchased the original frame building from Thomas Downey in 1875. Downey had run a hotel at the location since purchasing a lot from George Sparling in 1857. The Queen's was to remain in the Stephens family until Thomas died in 1936 as probably the oldest hotelier in Ontario. Sarah Morgan who is lovingly renovating the old building to restore it to its former glory currently owns the business.



It should also be noted that the building which was formerly known as the Dick House to older town residents still stands on the west side of Main Street, south of the grocery store. It was first built as a hotel in 1873 and went through several owners and

names prior to its final incarnation under James Dick and his son, Arthur. It currently houses apartments.

The area has always had a strong religious connection. The first permanent place of worship was the St. Thomas Anglican Church built in 1863 at the corner of John and Jarvis Streets. Rev C.C. Johnston was the first priest arriving in 1864. A chancel was added in 1872, and two wings in 1878. The Methodist Episcopal Church was purchased in 1885 and after being moved to its current location, was used as a parish hall.



The current North side United Church began life as the home of the Seaforth Wesleyan Methodist congregation in 1877. Prior to building the current structure, local Methodists had worshiped at a site in McKillop Township where a wood-frame church had been erected in 1858. They then constructed a frame building on the site in Seaforth. When the McKillop structure was removed to make way for a new building in 1877, it suffered the ignominious fate of becoming a Winthrop area barn on the property of William Gray. St James Catholic Church was constructed in 1869, but it was not until later that Seaforth became a parish in its own right rather than a mission of the church at St. Columban. In 1880, Rev P. Shea was appointed resident pastor. In 1897, a rectory was constructed beside the church.

At the turn of the 19th century Catholic education came to Seaforth under the guidance of Rev P. Corcoran. When a larger school was built in 1913, the Sisters of St. Joseph took over the teaching duties and were to serve the school faithfully until a lack of personnel caused them to withdraw. The present school was constructed in 1960.



Presbyterian congregations had existed in Harpurhey since 1835, and in Egmondville from 1844, but the First Presbyterian Church in Seaforth was not finished until 1868. Ten years later, the declining populations of the other two villages had forced the amalgamation of their congregations. This was followed in 1879 by a consolidation of all three congregations at First Presbyterian Church, Seaforth. A manse, which is still in use, was erected in 1880. A significant addition was made to the building in 1904 bringing the seating to 800. When church union was proposed in 1925, most of the Seaforth adherents rejected the move to the newly formed United Church.



The town's Carnegie Library was officially opened in September of 1913 on a site previously occupied by the Dominion Hotel. The Dominion had met the fate of many town buildings when it succumbed to fire in 1899. The library was extensively renovated in the 1990s to provide handicapped accessibility and better facilities.

Where We Worked

Seaforth has always encouraged its industries and over the years there were many besides the mills and salt works already mentioned. In 1975, the town fathers offered Messrs Coleman and Gouinlock, of salt industry acclaim, a bonus of \$10,000 if they were to prepared to invest a total of \$20,000 to bring a machine shop to Seaforth. The gentlemen rejected this and other terms and the deal fell through.

In 1899, two men from Hensall, Robert Bell and John Finlayson, took over a foundry and machine shop founded by Coleman. Four years later, it became the Robert Bell Engine and Thresher Company. They produced threshing machines and boilers. During the First World War, they were awarded a munitions contract and began to produce shells in 1915. After the death of Robert and his son Earl, the company was eventually acquired by Charlie Smith, who currently operates it as Boiler Smith Ltd. The complex underwent an expansion quite recently.



Another long-standing business is the Seaforth Creamery. Established in 1914, the company is still a major employer in town producing salad dressings and cheese.



Although no sign remains at the original location near Market and Jarvis Streets the firm of Broadfoot and Box ran a large planning mill and furniture factory in Seaforth for many years. Started as a planning mill by John Broadfoot in 1866, it was building doors and sashes as well as operating a cabinet shop by the time William Box joined the firm in 1876. The company rapidly expanded and by 1886, it operated a planning mill, two storey furniture factory,

finishing rooms and a separate fireproof engine house as well as various ancillary buildings.

The company was purchased in 1901 by Canadian Furniture Manufacturers who used it until 1931. Seaforth Concrete Products, and Huron Canadian Fabricators then used part of the site in succession. When the later moved to an industrial site on Birch Street, the lot was cleared for the Home of Raymond Murray. Synchro Combustion used the three-story factory building for several years until the early 70's when it was purchased by the town and replaced with a senior citizens residence.

Everyone Loves a Parade



Seaforth residents love a good party and over the years have turned out for several town wide celebrations. Old Boys and Girls reunions were held in 1914, 1924, 1955 and most recently the town's centennial celebrations of 1975. There was a smaller celebration in 1968 to celebrate Seaforth's 100th year since becoming a village. In 1897, Seaforth held another of its spectacular parades to wish Queen Victoria well on the 60th anniversary of her coronation.

The Seaforth Agricultural Society holds a fair each October and in times past a spring fair was held downtown on Main Street. Each November, Santa comes to town and brings a large selection of bands and floats with him.





The most recent special celebration was held in 2002 when Boyd Devereaux thrilled every aspiring NHLer for miles around by bring the Stanley Cup to Seaforth. No history of Seaforth would be complete without mentioning the Sills and McLean families who have done so much to secure the history of Seaforth. Beginning with George A. Sills in the early 1890s and continuing over four

generations, the family has operated a hardware business in town. The family preserved much of the material in the small museum housed at the town hall and their photographic collection is an irreplaceable visual history. The Sills Hardware business has operated from its present location on Main Street since 1921.

The Huron Expositor and the name of McLean will always be linked in Seaforth. Members of the family ran the newspaper for 112 years, outlasting all competitors prior to selling the paper in 1982. Alan and Murdo Y. McLean purchased the paper from William F. Luxton and George W. Ross and changed its name from The Seaforth Expositor. Murdo acted as the editor until he died in 1916. His son Keith then took over to be followed in turn in 1948 by Andrew Y. McLean. A.Y.'s daughter Susan assumed the editorship in the 70's and they were both active in the operating of the business until its sale. The paper is currently owned by the Sun Media newspaper chain. Over 112 years, the family and following publishers have chronicled Seaforth's births and deaths, triumphs and tragedies in a priceless record of continuous service to one community. The paper's archives have been transferred to microfilm and are accessible at the local library to anyone interested in learning more of the town's history and its colourful characters from times past.