COORJC Ghost Town Run:

Discovering the History of Road Colonization.

Road Colonization

This government program launched in 1854 to increase settlement and encourage agriculture. Twenty-five such roads were built to lure pioneers to the highlands of central Ontario. In order to attract settlers, the government hired agents to both promote the scheme and then ensure the settlements were successful. Agents received pay packets that were based both on the number of settlers they were able to attract, and by the sustainability of the settlement. The program was an easy sell, particularly in countries like Ireland, devastated already by the great potato famine.

The requirements seemed simple enough. The settlers were promised 100 acres of land in exchange for building a house, 18 X 20 feet in size, and cultivating at least 12 acres of land over a four-year period. Unfortunately, the government made a number of major blunders that resulted in an almost complete failure of the program. The most serious of all was their inability to determine whether the land they were offering was actually suitable for farming.

Alternate opinion suggests this was a cunningly crafted scheme devised to lure new immigrants into the province in order to clear the inhospitable and rocky lands for the lumber industry. Thus, what was not mentioned, were the true conditions of the soil which were thin, rocky, acidic and completely unsuitable for any form of sustainable agriculture. In the early 1870s the government opened the rich farmlands of the Canadian prairies and many of the farmers headed out west. One-by-one the small communities began to fail as settlers abandoned their lands in search of better opportunities creating many of Ontario ghost towns.

We start our journey exploring the Hasting Road Settlement. We will follow the Old Hasting Road from Madoc where in 1856 the government opened an agency for attracting potential settlers through to Ormsby. In Ormsby you can find the Hasting Road historical plaque and the original town store now operating as The Old Hastings Mercantile & Gallery, featuring fine Canadian arts & crafts, vintage toys, antiques, nostalgia, cottage-themed gifts & clothing, country-themed merchandise... and penny candy.

From here, we will move on to the Opeongo Road Settlement. Our journey will focus on the ghost towns scattered along the road within Renfrew County. We will pass through 2 other road settlements, Addington Road and Peterson Road, as we travel through Letterkenny (yes Letterkenny) to Brudenell where we start down the Opeongo Road. Time permitting the trip will end in Balaclava noted to be "the Hollywood version of the 'picture perfect' ghost town; a row of ramshackle buildings with sagging roofs, huddled along a narrow road, while doors and windows creak in the wind. The only thing missing are the tumbleweeds rolling down the middle of the road. "

(I cant make this shit up, its cut and paste!)

The Hastings Road Settlement

The Hastings Road was one of the most notable failures of the road colonization program. Between 1856 and 1858, when the road was completed, almost 3,000 people settled along the new road.

Other than poor farming, a major factor in the fail on this program was the defective quality of the Hastings Road. In 1868 a group of 57 settlers sent a plea to the Hastings County Council begging for funds and a competent crew to do the necessary roadwork. In it they referred to bridges being washed out, drainage problems requiring culverts and crossovers, terrain that was too rough for even light wagons and damage caused by the lumber industry. (Humm sounds like a jeep trail to me!) Nevertheless, as the settlers became established they began to form small communities such as Glanmire, Murphy's Corner and Mill Bridge.
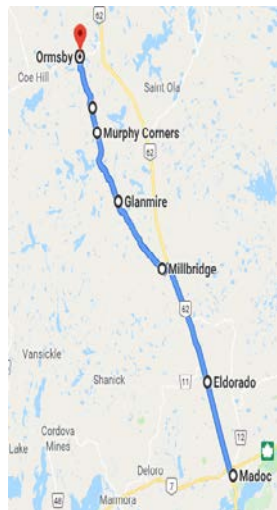
Eldorado

Eldorado's infamous history began with John Richardson, a middle-aged farmer, who had fled from Ireland almost 30 years earlier. As with most land along the Hasting Road, Richardson's land was thin and rocky. Richardson was tired and fed up when he decided to give it one last shot in the hope that the many outcrops on his land would yield something of value. In the summer of 1866 he hired Marcus (Mark) Powell, a young court clerk and part-time prospector to begin explorations on his land.

When rumours of gold discoveries such as "gold the size of butternuts" began to surface, the town, not surprisingly, grew from nothing to some 80 buildings almost overnight. Prospectors and speculators arrived in droves to have their pickings of the anticipated riches. It was estimated some 3,000 people gravitated towards the area. Eldorado boasted four hotels, two grocery stores, a dry goods store, a lawyer and a physician.

Although the gold was supposedly extremely pure, the deposits were small, isolated and sporadic. Investors quickly bailed out and the mine was shut down.

Eldorado was able to reinvent itself as a railway centre during the early 1880s. The construction of the Central Ontario Railway, which began in 1882, offered employment to 200 men. During the mid 1880s, Eldorado's population stood at around 75. By then the village included three churches as well as a school. The seed of a new industry was planted with the opening of S. Thompson's cheese factory.

Today Eldorado has been reduced to a rural backwater although it is showing signs of rejuvenation. The village still contains a few homes, some of which are occupied and others that are abandoned. One of the early general stores still stands and remains partially occupied. A combination gas bar and general store remains open. Although the cheese factory stopped producing cheese in 1991, the retail outlet remained open until 2011. It is now closed and for sale. A historical plaque alongside the highway tells the story of Eldorado and the famous Hastings gold rush of the 1860s

Millbridge and Millbridge Station

Millbridge originally named "The Jordan" because of its proximity to Jordan Creek, was first settled in the mid 1850s. When a mill was established alongside the water it eventually became known as "the mill by the bridge. The name stuck and Jordan got a new name.

By the mid 1880s, Millbridge was booming. The Millbridge annual fair was one of the county's big events. The population had grown to about 125 and the village counted three general stores and two blacksmiths. At the beginning of the 1880s Millbridge had one hotel. By 1886, that number had jumped to three.

The arrival of the Central Ontario Railway in 1883 led to the establishment of a small satellite village, a few kilometres east of Millbridge, near the site of the popular Hogan's Hotel which once hosted the village church services. Hogan's Hotel is now used as a private residence however the owners have retained the unusual hand-painted Victorian signs.

Millbridge continued to thrive during the latter part of the 19th century. In 1895 the village contained three stores, two hotels a church and a cheese factory. A new schoolhouse was built in 1904 and telephones had arrived by 1910.

Many of the original buildings in Millbridge, including the church, hotel, and general store still stand and are now used as private residences.   Portions of the former rail-bed have been converted to a recreational trail.

Glanmire

Glanmire first settled around 1856, served the important function of sorting and moving the mail on a weekly basis from Millbridge to York River (now Bancroft). The postmasters found it next to impossible to traverse the difficult terrain. For a while it was also known as Jelly's Rapids, after Andrew Jelly, a prominent pioneer settler and former postmaster.   Population was never large and probably peaked at around 50 but it was enough to keep things going for a while. A school was built in 1860 and St. Margaret's Anglican Church was eventually added in 1887.

Glanmire survived a little longer than many of the earlier Hastings Road settlements. The post office lasted until 1939 and the church until the late 1950s. The church demolished in the early 60s was a victim of ongoing vandalism. All that remains are the steps and commemorative stone.

Commemorative stone for St. Margaret's Anglican Church

Murphy Corners

Murphy Corners was first settled in the 1850s. It began with a small sawmill and was in an ideal location to serve the milling needs of the surrounding communities. By 1870 it included a school and a church. Murphy's Corner was on the mail route that travelled through Glanmire but it never had a post office of its own.

Unlike most of the failed communities along the Hastings Road, Murphy Corners still has a few relics left to show. The original Murphy home still stands along with an old gas station that was closed at least 30 years ago.

Ormsby

Originally called Rathburn, after the logging company, the town thrived in the late 1800s as the last stop on the Central Ontario Railway.   In its heyday it had 2 hotels, 2 stores, 2 churches, a school, blacksmith, a sawmill and more. By 1893 the population was at 225. In the middle of the 1900's Ormsby also had a Department of Lands and Forests fire tower lookout on the nearby hill.

Ormsby is the most intact of the road's ghost towns.   Since 2003 however, interest and activity in the village have returned. Of the five century buildings that remain, the general store is now The Old Hastings Mercantile & Gallery, the one-room school has been restored and given new life as The Old Ormsby Schoolhouse "Educated Dining" & Tea Room, while the Catholic church continues weekly mass.

Along the way -- Letterkenny

Letterkenny was another early pioneer settlement that came to life as a result of the government's road colonization program. Located on the sparsely populated Addington Road, near the intersection of the Peterson Road, Letterkenny was a small crossroads hamlet serving the needs of the nearby farming community.

Letterkenny was never large and during its best years the population hovered at around 50.

In the 1930s Letterkenny managed to achieve a notoriety of sorts when, according to local folklore, mobster Al Capone was rumoured to have been holed up in a log cabin situated on the Letterkenny road near Quadeville.

All that survives today are the church, cemetery and a few farms. The lovely little church is well maintained and continues to be used for special occasions.


The Opeongo Road History

The Opeongo Road was completed in 1867, it stretched 110 kilometres from Ottawa through Renfrew County to Algonquin Park. T his historic road, now renamed Highway 64, is littered with the remains of small communities that failed, largely because of poor planning practices.

The area was full of rich virgin forests and eventually lumbering interests took over. By 1893, J.R. Booth had expanded his lumbering interests into Algonquin Park. His railway, the Ottawa, Arnprior and Parry Sound ran through the park, bypassing the Opeongo Road.

In the late 1970s, the Ontario government commissioned a detailed study on the old Opeongo Road. The report documented numerous heritage structures and unique examples of log construction considered ripe for preservation. One interesting recommendation that came out of the study was for the road to be turned into a heritage route with detailed markings and plaques along the way. Not surprisingly, this being Ontario, it never happened. Consequently, many of these structures eventually collapsed into piles of rubble or disappeared entirely.

Today the Opeongo Road, with the old rough-hewn old log homes and split rail fences, retains much of its pioneer flavour.
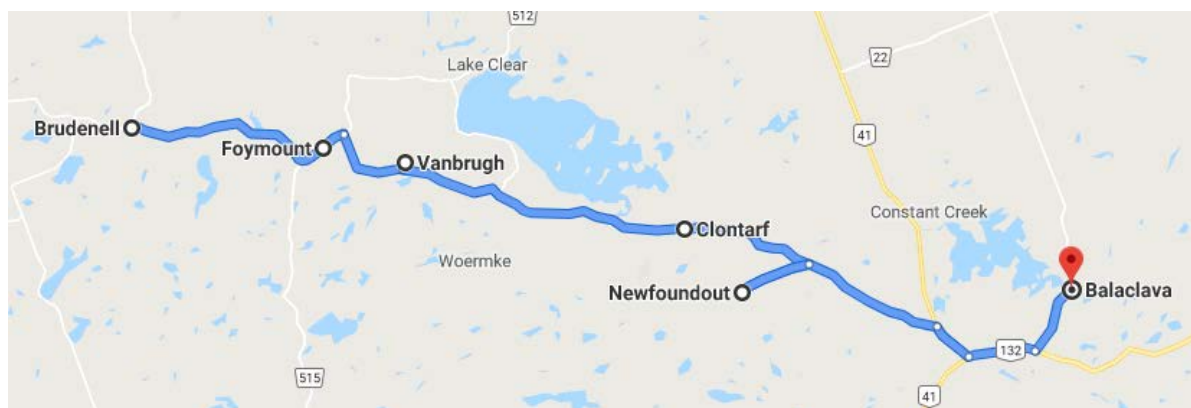
Brudenell

Brudenell was the largest and most prosperous community on the old Opeongo Road. The village was first settled in the 1850s originally known as 'Brudenell Corners' and alternately as 'Payette Corners', after Madame Payette's busy hotel with the dubious reputation as the most notorious 'sin-bucket' along the Opeongo.

Brudenell was a rough, tough outpost catering to the many lumberjacks. By the late 1860s, Brudenell boasted three hotels, all of which had taverns. Although this seemed rather excessive considering Brudenell only had about 200 residents, the actual transient and stopover population was said to be much higher. A dditional entertainment was available at the Brudenell racetrack.

Brudenell's rather unsavoury reputation took a turn for the worse in the early 1870s following the arrival of 'Black Jim' Costello and the establishment of Costello's Hotel. Almost immediately the hotel became known as a locale where gambling and other sins of a far worse nature were rumoured to be taking place.

Brudenell's demise came with the arrival of J.R. Booth's railway in 1893. The railway traversed through Algonquin Park, where most of Booth's lumbering activities were taking place, completely bypassing Brudenell.

Today the Catholic Church still functions and a tiny handful of people continue to call Brudenell home. The schoolhouse, located halfway between Brudenell and Foymount, is now privately owned. The old Costello hotel, weathered and sinister looking, was used as a private dwelling for many years. It has been up for sale for quite some time. A few other buildings including one of the stores can be found along the highway.

Foymount

While located on the Openong Road, Foymount was not a settlement of the road program. Foymount was built in 1950 as a radar station site. This was part of defence plans for a series of 33 prime radar stations stretching from coast to coast across Canada.

The station included 65 houses, a school, medical and dental facilities, a recreation room with a gym, swimming pool, general store, post office and a host of other amenities. Initial personnel estimates were 38 officers and 343 mixed ranks and civilians.

By 1963 computer technology had advanced to the point where interceptors were automated and controlled directly from Ottawa. Station Foymount was upgraded to intruder-detection only and the unit was renamed the 32 Radar Squadron. Military downsizing in the early 1970s led to the eventual closure and the radar towers and operations centre were dismantled.

Although Foymount still contains a number of ruins, the new residents are not ready to see their community die. Many of occupied homes have been renovated and repaired and their owners appear eager to recapture the strong social and community ties they enjoyed during Foymount's military heyday.

Vanbrugh

Vanbrugh's schoolhouse, now a private home.

Vanbrugh was first settled in 1858. It was sometimes hard to define the border between Vanbrugh and Clontarf. According to records, the hotel, which also shows up in neighbouring Clontarf records, was likely located between the two communities.

By the mid 1880s, Vanbrugh was a bustling little town site of about 50 or 60 people. The residents were well served by a variety of amenities. Vanbrugh included 2 churches and a school, two blacksmiths, a general store and post office and telegraph service.

By the late 1880s, 2 sawmills were opened and during the early 1890s, Vanbrugh's population jumped to around 110 people. Both sawmills remained in operation through the early part of the 20th century.

After the sawmills closed there wasn't much left to sustain Vanbrugh. Very little remains of the town site and it's becoming more and more difficult to find.

Clontarf

Clontarf had its beginnings when former land colonization agent, T.P. French opened a post office in 1858. The new settlement was originally known as Sebastopol, however was renamed Clontarf in 1860.

French's efforts at building a small community initially seem to have been successful. By the mid 1860s, Clontarf was a busy place. Its population had reportedly grown to about 150. By the 1880s Clontarf had acquired a church as well as a school. During that period it functioned mainly a service and supply centre, that in addition to the regular services, such as blacksmithing and carpentry, also offered a tannery, painting and carpet weaving. Later on, it acquired two sawmills. The community also boasted a thriving industry in beekeeping that included two apiarists, one of whom manufactured hives and sold supplies.

Following the demise of the lumber industry, Clontarf began to decline during the early part of the 20th century although it continued to support a small rural population. The community itself was stretched out along the Opeongo Road without any central point of origin and is difficult to find. The school still exists and has been converted to a private home. A general store and gas bar are still operating and churches continue to function and the area still supports a small, but vibrant, population.

Newfoundout

Although most of the early settlements were built right along the road, the road planners also included a means to access the backlands on each side of the road. Every 10 lots or so, they would open a road into the mountains and hills. It was on one of these side roads where the tiny settlement of Newfoundout got its start.

Newfoundout was never an actual village or community. 13 families braved their way up approximately 6 kilometres of twisting, winding road (shame they didn't have jeeps) and attempted to eke out a meagre living by farming. There were no schools or churches. In order to attend school children had to navigate the rocky mountain trail on foot. There were no stores however, the farmers were able to help one another out with light sawmilling and blacksmithing services. A post office, known as Donohue, was opened in 1914.

Despite their most valiant efforts the soil was completely infertile and by the mid 1940s most of the families had given up the struggle. In 1948 Newfoundout was officially declared abandoned. The lands remain privately owned and continue to be used in the summer for cattle grazing. Numerous shells of log cabins and other farm buildings are scattered along the side of the road.

Balaclava - Renfrew

Balaclava began as a mill town built on Constant Creek in 1855. By 1860 a blacksmith shop, hotel and homes were added. The mill was acquired by the Richards family in 1868 who operated the mill for the next 91 years. The mill was rebuilt in 1936 after a good deal of the original mill was destroyed by fire. A sawdust burner was added around 1903 to comply with anti-pollution legislation. Up until this time the owners of the mill simply dumped their sawdust into the river.

Although Balaclava had been a busy industrial and farming centre throughout the latter part of the 19th century, for some reason it was bypassed by the railways. That, along with failing farms and dwindling lumber supplies, signalled its demise. Stubbornly, the mill continued to operate on water power until 1967.

Balaclava, Ontario is said to be one of the creepiest places in the province to explore. The remains of Balaclava include the old water powered sawmill, one of the last to operate in Ontario. If you look closely you can still see pieces of machinery and wagon wheels inside the building. This is all private property so please do not trespass.