

## The Canadian Drury Family Story – 1819 to 2019

The enclosure of common fields by Parliament and the economic depression following the Napoleonic Wars took their toll on English yeoman farmers. Many were forced to give up their land and emigrate to North America. Although Joseph Drury owned a small freehold farm near Kenilworth in Warwickshire, he decided that Upper Canada would provide better opportunities for his family. Joseph and two of his sons (14 year old Richard and 16 year old Thomas) made the long and dangerous voyage to Crown Hill, on the newly constructed Penetanguishene Road. Joseph's other children and his wife remained in England while the forest was cleared and buildings erected on the first of two Drury farms – what came to be known as Kenilworth Farm. Both properties remain in the family two centuries later.

Conditions in pioneer Canada were difficult and Joseph died in a raging snowstorm in 1823. Richard and Thomas continued with the hard work of homesteading. Their mother and younger siblings stayed in Kenilworth – where some of their descendants still live. Brother Edmund later moved to Canada. In 1831 Richard returned to visit his family and married Elizabeth Bishop, who joined him in Upper Canada.

The Drurys of Crown Hill had much in common with other settlers who came to Canada in the early 1800s. They created thriving farms from virgin forests. They lived without basic necessities in order to make a better future for their children. They worked cooperatively with their neighbours to build a caring rural society. But Joseph Drury's descendants were also exceptional in many respects. They were often the first to question conventional wisdom and pioneered new farming techniques. They were leaders in their community, spearheading the development of public schools, promoting higher education for farm children, founding farmer organizations and cooperatives, fighting against the abuses of big business, and harnessing the tools of government to make a better society for farmers and working people. Above all, the Drurys believed in a just and caring society. Joseph's great grandson, E.C. Drury, summed up the family philosophy in his 1965 autobiography "Farmer Premier": "the task (of society) down through the ages has been to resist the predators, to see that the law is not used to despoil society, to see that every man gets what he earns, and, equally important, to see that every man earns what he gets. And the conscientious citizen will find that the more justice there is, the less mercy will be required."

Joseph Drury's sons, Thomas and Richard, were hard working farmers of their homestead lands but also visionary leaders in their community. Thomas became an Oro Township councillor and reeve and for many years Sheriff of Simcoe County. Richard was the first reeve of Oro Township and was appointed as a County Magistrate, holding court for minor offences in the front room of his home. He established a public school at Crown Hill and made sure that his son Charles went on to high school in Barrie (a rare thing for a farmer's son in those early days). The homestead he built in 1836 was filled with classic books, including Homer's Odyssey and works by Milton, Thackeray and Adam Smith. He frequently remarked on the importance of an "educated man behind the plough handles".

Charles was born in 1844. He and his siblings were strong advocates of free trade and temperance. He led the Drury family from the Anglican to the Methodist Church because it owned shares in a distillery at a time when alcohol abuse was a major social problem. The Drurys were always fearless in sticking to their beliefs, even when these were unpopular. Charles was reeve of Oro Township for 13 years and served for a decade as Liberal Member of the Provincial Parliament. In 1888 Premier Oliver Mowat appointed him as Ontario's first Minister of Agriculture and he played a key role in expanding the Ontario Agricultural College (OAC). Charles was also President of the Agricultural and Arts Association of Ontario and was Simcoe County Sheriff for a decade. In 1890 he built a large, beautiful brick home on Kenilworth Farm, currently occupied by great-grandson Bob and his wife Laura.

Charles' first wife (Mary Varley) died in 1878 following the birth of their son Ernest Charles Drury. Ernest was a precocious child. He voraciously consumed the classic books brought to Canada by his great-grandfather Joseph and added to by his parents and grandparents. He graduated from OAC (then a College of the University of Toronto) with a BSA degree in 1900 and returned to the family farms. On January 11, 1905 he married his childhood sweetheart, Ella Partridge. His father, Charles, died the next day from diabetes and Ernest and Ella took over the family farms.

A strong advocate of scientific farming techniques and a foe of the big business interests that exploited farmers, Ernest realized that collective action was necessary to advance the cause of agriculture. He threw himself into organizing farmers. In 1905, Ernest presented the farmers' case against protective tariffs before the Fielding Commission and several years later before a Royal Commission investigating price fixing in the concrete industry. In 1910 he helped to found the first national farm organization - the Canadian Council of Agriculture - and was elected its first Secretary. With the defeat of the free trade treaty with America in 1911, and the increasingly predatory practices of monopolistic business, Drury and Ontario farmers saw the need for a more radical farm organization. Ernest became increasingly involved in "politics". (In his frequent absences Ella capably managed both the operation of the farm and the raising of their young family.) The United Farmers of Ontario (UFO) was founded in 1914, with Drury as President. He also co-founded the United Farmers Cooperative Company to compete with the business cartels exploiting farmers. Ernest was in demand as a speaker across Canada and was recognized as the preeminent leader of Ontario farmers.

By 1917 it became clear that big business had made huge war profits, while the incomes of farmers had shrunk. They were expected to produce more while their sons and hired men were conscripted. The farmers and labour unions were united in their anger against the Conservative governments in Ottawa and Toronto and decided to run candidates in the 1919 provincial election. They elected enough MPPs to replace the Conservative government and Ernest Charles Drury was asked to become Premier.

In four years the Drury Government brought in dozens of progressive measures. It introduced allowances for widows and children, a minimum wage for women, a mandatory day of rest, broadened workers compensation benefits, improved support mechanisms for parents and children,

introduced legislation to allow for public adoptions, extended hydro-electricity to rural areas, supported the nationalization of private electricity companies by Ontario Hydro (making it the largest electric power system in the world) and created the Province of Ontario Savings Office as a provincially-owned bank to provide competition to the private banks. Under the Drury government Ontario began the first major reforestation program in North America, initiated construction of the modern highway system, funded Banting and Best's discovery of insulin, raised the age of mandatory school attendance from 14 to 16 years, instituted the inspection of workplaces for unsafe conditions, and created the Ontario Provincial Police force. The government also established a Department of Mines to support the new mining industry and an Ontario College of Education to raise the standard of teachers, cleaned up Conservative corruption in the sale of timber rights to their business friends, and passed the Children's Protection Act.

But the Drury Government also made enemies. Prohibition was expanded after the 1919 election and the Attorney General aggressively prosecuted bootleggers. The UFO's Labour partners opposed this and the Conservatives promised to loosen liquor laws if returned to power. The UFO itself began to fracture, with Drury's supporters favouring a "People's Party" of farmers and labour working together, while agrarian purists fought this "broadening out" as heresy. The UFO lost to the Conservatives in 1923.

In some ways, E.C. Drury was relieved to return to his family and farms at Crown Hill. He and Ella had five growing children and a loving relationship, which he had missed in the years at Queen's Park. Ernest focused his attention on improving Kenilworth Farm but he kept his hand in politics, unsuccessfully running as a Liberal in three federal elections. But tragedy struck in 1931, when a botched surgery prematurely ended the life of Ernest's soul mate Ella – a loss he never fully recovered from. In the mid-thirties he was appointed to the combined offices of Simcoe County Sheriff, County Court Clerk and local Registrar of the Supreme Court of Ontario - responsibilities he held for a quarter of a century. He was also a regular contributor to Maclean's and other national publications and received awards for his first book – *Forts of Folly* – a treatise against the evils of protective tariffs. In the 1940s Ernest wrote extensively on local history and presented a paper on the history of African Canadians in Oro at the annual meeting of the Ontario Historical Association. He also led a fund-raising campaign to restore the African Church near Edgar.

In the 1950s Ernest published *All For a Beaver Hat*, a history of the Huron people. The book chronicled how the English and French manipulated their indigenous allies in the fur trade, a novel interpretation that highlighted how the Huron were more "advanced" and democratic than their European partners. In his twilight years, Ernest published his life story: *Farmer Premier*. He died in 1968 at the age of ninety.

Ernest and Ella had five children - Charles (Carl), Varley, Elizabeth, Mabel and Harold. Carl (and Mae Emms) and Harold (and Marion Edgerton) carried on the Drury agrarian tradition by taking over from their father the farms originally homesteaded by their ancestors. Elizabeth graduated from Macdonald Institute at OAC to become chief dietician for Barrie's Royal Victoria Hospital, and later married Howell Partridge. Mabel

graduated from Normal School but after two years of teaching married a young local farmer (Gordon Dunsmore). Varley obtained a science degree from OAC, married Margaret Raynor and pursued a career as a high school teacher.

Their children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren - male and female - have all made/are making important and meaningful contributions to their communities and country. Many have graduated from post-secondary education programs (more than a dozen from OAC/ University of Guelph), worked for federal, provincial and municipal governments, planted many trees, volunteered in their communities, and benefitted from the Ontario Adoption Act. Some of them have been teachers, commercial pilots, nurses, entrepreneurs, well drillers, fitness trainers, IT professionals, managers, lawyers, geologists, landscape architects, accountants, financial planners, insurance specialists, corporate vice presidents, Tim Hortons franchisee and, yes, elected public officials. Bob Drury, current owner of Kenilworth Farm, served as an Oro councillor between 1982 and 1985 and reeve between 1985 and 1994 – when Oro and Medonte were amalgamated and Bob became the first mayor of the new municipality. He was also elected as Warden of Simcoe County in 1994 and later served on the Ontario Municipal Board. Thus Bob Drury's great-great grandfather Richard was the first reeve of Oro Township and Bob was its last reeve.

The occupations of today's family members are very different, but all can be linked to their ancestors' beliefs, hard work and vision. Perhaps most importantly, a number of the Drury descendants have kept alive the agrarian tradition and still farm in a modern highly technical way. Many of them still live on or near the original Crown Hill farms and have shared their love of the land and their wisdom and knowledge with their children. They have always honoured their ancestors by being stewards of the land.

Until the mid-twentieth century written history focused on men. The accomplishments of the early Drury women are not recorded. However, we know that they carried an equal burden to their husbands and shared in their successes and sacrifices. In the last several generations Drury women and men have equally distinguished themselves - professionally, academically and personally.

The Drurys have made important contributions to the history of Ontario. Some would even say they "punched above their weight". But whatever they have done for their communities, it is primarily for the benefit of their fellow citizens. This is the real legacy we celebrate at this 200 year mark.

### **Richard Partridge 2019**

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