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## Historical Perspectives

# Thompsonville: From going concern to quiet rural hamlet

by Andrew Hind

*Special to The Herald*

It was something of a tradition in 19th Century Ontario. Trailblazing settlers would stake claim to previously uninhabited regions, build a farm and perhaps a mill, and then lay out lots for the development of a village in the hope of attracting new homesteaders.

Perhaps inevitably, the new village was usually named in honor of the original settler, preserving his name for all posterity. While certainly there was some ego involved in this practice, it was more a reflection of unbridled optimism and entrepreneurial spirit, qualities that were integral to the development of our nation. These dreamers felt they were on the verge of something great, that their little hamlets were destined to boom alongside the rest of the country. Unfortunately it didn't always work out like that. Just ask Tommie Thompson.

A brief sojourn on the backroads of Tecumseth Township, just a few miles south of Alliston, will take you to the heart of Thompson's dream. You can still see why he was so optimistic. The graceful Nottawasaga River quietly drains the fertile soils of the Nottawasaga Valley, offering ample water to power mills and irrigate crops. The land has a lush and vibrant look about it.

Of course, when Thompson arrived in 1850, the land was heavily wooded, but even so it's strengths were readily apparent. Tommie Thompson came from Ireland in search of a new life, chasing a dream. He eventually settled on Lot 9, Concession 13. Together, he and his sons cleared a farm, dammed the river, and built a sawmill, flour mill, gristmill, and woolen mill. Confident that others could be lured to the area, baited by its fertile soils, he surveyed the land into 26 lots. Naturally enough, he named the proposed town Thompsonville.

Tecumseth Township was undergoing a sustained growth spurt in the 1850's. Before the 1840's, it was very much wilderness, sparsely populated at best. An early census shows

less than 500 settlers in the entire township in the mid 1830's. But Thompson arrived at a fortuitous moment. The forests were being cleared at a tremendous rate, roads were pushing further into the interior, and thousands of settlers were pouring into the area in a desperate search for land. By 1850, the population of the township had jumped to over 3,600. Thompson's lots were soon spoken for.

In no time, the village crossroads, the intersection of Thomas and Prospect Streets became the heart of a thriving community. It boasted several businesses, including Schmietendorf's general store, a blacksmith's shop, a church, an Orange Hall, and several hotels. A post office opened January 13, 1859. The village continued to grow, forcing Thompson to add another 40 lots to meet demand. Most early settlers were fellow Irishmen, Protestants from the far north of the Emerald Isle.

In 1868, a miller named William Train arrived in town. He established his business to the north of Thompsonville, building homes for his workers around it.

Train dubbed the little collection of homes Trainsville, and for some reason, when the Hamilton and Northwestern Railroad came through in 1877, they decided to site its flag station here rather than nearer the much larger Thompsonville. In due time, a platform for passengers and a siding for the mill were built. This apparently, led to considerable animosity between Thompson and Train. Besides being business rivals, Thompson presumably resented Train and his upstart little community.

Developments soon showed the folly of the railroads' decision, however. Trainsville withered a few years later with the collapse of Trains milling business, and the flag station had to be moved to Thompsonville.

The coming of the railroad ushered in the village's high tide. An impressive Methodist church, later to become the Thompsonville United Church,

was constructed in 1880. The population hovered at around 300 people, and there was upwards of 30 businesses at the time. It seems as though Tommie's dream was becoming a reality.

But this boom period was destined to last less than a decade. While railways could bring prosperity, they also accelerated the trend towards large factories in large towns. Unable to compete against goods produced en masse in factories, the village factory and craftsman slowly disappeared. Artisans in Thompsonville began to close shop and move to Toronto or nearby Alliston. A trickle down effect saw other establishments close as well, notably the hotels. When Thompson's mill burnt to the ground in 1888, it was the final nail in the coffin.

It's actually incredible how completely a thriving and sizable community can vanish in just a century. Not much remains of Thompsonville, the passing years devouring the hopes and dreams of Thompson and those who bought into his vision. Yet, if you know where to look, some vestiges remain.

The Thompsonville United Church was torn down in 1956, but a cairn has been erected to mark its former location. Across the road is the pioneer cemetery, and nearby are a cluster of original homes and the former general store, situated in what was the heart of the community. A little bit east, shrouded by a copse of trees, stands the former hotel. It too has been preserved as a private home.

Several pioneer roads, now little more than trails, disappear into the bush.

Train Street still exists, but is now a residential lane flanked by new residences. The regenerated woods have long since reclaimed the mill sites.

*To get to Thompsonville, take Country Road 10 (Simcoe Road 2) south from 89 to Side Road 13. Follow it east for a few kilometres. When you come upon a small bridge over a river, you've arrived. Thompsonville remains clearly marked on most maps.*