

THE SELKIRK COLONIAL SOCIETY

Towards the end of the nineteenth century a thriving textile industry had developed in Hespeler, a township in the Canadian province of Ontario.

Several Selkirk men were drawn there for one reason or another. They were held together by their common birthplace - especially at the time of the Common Riding - and, of course, informed the folk back home of any opportunities which might be available to others.

In 1909 one of them, Thomas B. Williamson, was in Selkirk for the Common Riding and thoroughly enjoyed being back among his native folk. On his return to Canada, however, he was bitterly disappointed to learn that an old friend had been home from Australia but their paths had never crossed. That experience set his mind working and he conceived the idea that if the exiles had a flag similar to those of the Trades Incorporations it would serve as a rallying point for all returned exiles. He passed the idea around and in 1910 forty six Souters met in a Hespeler hostelry and founded the Selkirk Colonial Society. Membership was not confined to the souter-born but it was to include also their progeny.

In 1911 the plan came to fruition and the golden standard which had been crafted in Canada was carried in the Common Riding procession and cast after those of the Crafts in the closing ceremony. To mark the occasion, immediately before the Colonial flag was cast, a choir of primary schoolchildren under their master, Mr Bowmont Weddell, sang the song, "The Maple Leaf Forever".

Arrangements and formalities had been arranged by Mr Crichton, editor of the Southern Reporter and close friend of Williamson's, backed by a committee of representatives of the Crafts.

The Society never looked back. During the early years standard bearers came not only from Canada but from Hawaii, New Zealand, South Africa Malaya and Australia. Through time the Society came to be managed, as it is today, by a group of emigrants who had returned to Selkirk. They held a social function to entertain those returned and held a Bussin' Concert on the "nicht afore", for many years in the Picture House. In a very busy week it was not easy to find accomodation for either. In the 1960's, however, a popular event of the week, the public casting practice, was discontinued - coinciding with the demolition of the Picture House - and the Colonial Society stepped into the gap, holding their Bussin' concert in the Victoria Hall and the reception in the Lesser Victoria. The arrangement proved an imediate success and, with the Band of the High School leading the community singing, it became one of the biggest precursors to the Common Riding. By this time, with the coming of air travel, numbers had swollen from single figures to an average of around forty.

The original flag was huge, as may be seen in the picture, and required a massive pole. To make the casting easier a lighter casting flag was procured at an early stage, though the original was retained as the ceremonial and carried in the procession. When the day came that it had to be replaced it was decided that a lighter flag would be better as it could be allowed to spread in the breeze.. A badge had been devised showing the figure of the Flodden survivor, Fletcher, striding over the world, and that was the charge adopted for the flag (the inclusion of the Burgh arms had been found to be improper) but it retained the motto originally coined in Canada, **Yince a Souter, Aye a Souter.**

Through the years standard bearers have come from South Africa (9), Australia (16), New Zealand (9), U.S.A. (10) with two each from Inia and Honolulu, but Canada still keeps ahead with 18. There have also been a standard bearer from Brazil, Trinidad, Barbados, Mauritius, Sweden, Ethiopia, Sierra Leone, Indonesia, Qatar and France.

There have been several non-souters served as standard Bearer but representing their Selkirk-born wives and, recalling the fact that progeny were eligible, there have been sons and grandsons cast the Colonials flag, in one case three generations of one family. One of the most remarkable is a father and son who have cast the Colonial flag following on three generations who cast other Selkirk flags before them.

The Colonial Society ventured into the record business in the 1960's when they produced a long-playing record of the Common Riding music. Such was the success that after twentyfive years the recording was reproduced on cassette, this to be followed by a second volume containing the music omitted from the original. Now, in the twentyfirst century, most of the music is available on compact disc thanks to the effort and expertise of a Canadian member, Adam Houston, who lives within easy reach of Hespeler, now a district of Cambridge City.

Thus the Selkirk Colonial Society looks to the future with good prospects and the achievement of their centenary year, 2010.