

AC495 and AC496

Gavin Alexander McDonald describes his great-grandparents' arrival and life in Osprey Township, Ontario. Here is a transcription of the first few minutes of about four hours of audio recording.

Recording of Gavin "Uncle Gavin" McDonald (1892 - 1978)

Side A starts...in 1790, her name was Janet McLean, later she married Angus McPhail and they lived in the fishing village named Scarinish on the west coast of Scotland on the island named Tiree. They had a family of eight, six girls and two boys. He was a sailor on a China clipper ship that went to China, loaded up with tea and then came home as fast as they could, to get the tea to market while it was still fresh. Times were bad in Scotland and on Tiree as their main food was potatoes and fish and they could not grow enough potatoes for themselves. They had to import them from Ireland but a blight had hit the Irish potato crop and potatoes were scarce and expensive. As they could not see any future for the family and the island, they decided to go to Canada. So while he made one last trip to China, she sold the house and arranged passage to Canada. I think it was on a chartered vessel. They were all ready to go as soon as he got back but when the ship came home they received the sad news that he'd been lost at sea. I don't know how.

On one of those trips to China, he brought home a pound of tea for his wife. I guess it would be a pretty good present at that time for tea was very expensive. Not many people could afford it. It was in a box made of - it was ebony with a picture of Chinese ladies having a tea party on the four sides and on the lid. I still have the box.

His death did not change things. So they went to Canada anyway. I think it took them three months on the trip. Smallpox had broke out on board ship and when they got to Halifax there was no quarantine station there then and as no one would take them in on account of the smallpox, they had to make shelters in brush yards and fenced quarters and live there until all the danger of spreading was past. Then up the St. Lawrence River and finally landing in Collingwood on the Georgian Bay and there they took up land in Osprey Township, Grey County, Ontario.

I don't know much about the early days in Ontario but as they are sailors and knew how to use tools on wood they built themselves houses out of logs and they did not have any nails so they just had to bore a hole and use wooden pegs and peg them together. They were able to tan leather and made their own boots, the soles were fastened on with wooden pegs. They were better than nails as the pegs would not rust out. Then they got sheep and they used the wool for things, stockings, mitts and caps and so forth and also they had a local weaver, who would make homespun cloth for clothes. They had very little money so most often business was done by trade. Each man had to work on road building so-so many days each year, so they got the roads built. The country there was quite hilly, it was on the top of the Blue Mountains. At first they had to walk to Collingwood for supplies, about 15 miles. In the winters they would cross the rivers on the ice but in the summer they had to walk across on a log.

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