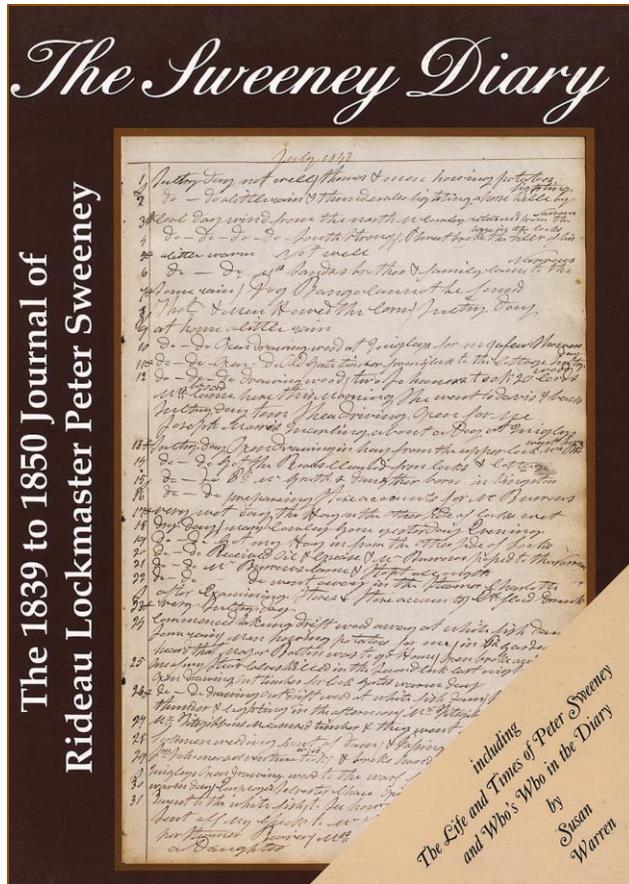


Booze, family fights pepper Jones Falls diary

By Francie Healy



JONES FALLS – It peeks frequently from the pages of Peter Sweeney’s diary like a nasty family skeleton: C.D.H.A.Q.

Catherine Drunk Had A Quarrel.

His wife might have been a bit of a thorn in his side, but Peter Sweeney, first lockmaster at Jones Falls, was no angel himself. He was a loud, obnoxious Irish Catholic obsessed by the demons of alcohol.

Catherine, an English Anglican, liked her whisky, too, and was given to loud brawls with her husband and children.

When you stand in their house on top of the steep hill at Jones Falls more than 150 years later, you can almost hear the Philistine china rattle with their wrath.

Peter and Catherine had two rather dreadful children, Kitty and Thomas, who made modern-day soap operas look like a tea party. The family, with its violent arguments and wild children, was the talk of all the settler families in the region.

Raised in isolation with parental fights, a religious tug-of-war and drunkenness, they finally rebelled and disgraced their parents. Kitty ran off with a canalman, and Thomas had to leave the country for threatening to shoot his father.

Sue Warren of Jones Falls is writing a history of South Crosby Township.

She transcribed Peter Sweeney’s diary from the original, and a typed copy sits on an old pine table at the door of the lovely old house with so many turbulent memories.

A string of lockmasters lived in it after Peter Sweeney up until 1968, when it closed as a residence, says Parks Canada guide Paul Rutkas, a law student at Dalhousie University who takes pride in sharing his love of history with a visitor. It was left empty until 1980, when Parks Canada restored the house to the way it was when the Sweeneys lived there.

Now clothes are strewn on the four-poster beds as if the Sweeneys had just left for the afternoon. The first cookbook printed in Upper Canada sits on a table in the kitchen, ready for Catherine to use for making biscuits.

Mr. Rutkas says people come from miles around just to read Peter Sweeney’s diary.

“They’ll sit there for hours at a time,” he says, “while their spouses get impatient.”

The diary is written in dull language. There is no colour, no emotion. And yet it’s fascinating reading, partly because of what isn’t said.

Christmas, for instance, is never mentioned. It was as if it didn’t happen. There is no talk of a party, or a meal, or presents. Only the weather, animals, and trips away from the lockstation are recorded. And “C.D.H.A.Q.,” the only indication of any feeling.

Peter and Catherine seem to have been as wild and unsettled as Jones Falls itself, hidden away, isolated, with nothing for early settlers to be excited about except its fantastic 60-foot waterfall.

Colonel By thought it was a place to be reckoned with and made it part of the system of locks he was building along the Rideau.

In 1827 construction began. Colonel By hired the best in the business, John Redpath, a Scottish-born stonemason living in Montreal, who had built McGill University and magnificent cathedrals. “He really knew his stuff,” Ms. Warren says.

Redpath hired between 200 and 500 men. Most of them were French Canadians or Irishmen from Montreal. Before they could begin the canal, they had to link up roads to Elgin and bring stones from a quarry owned by Henry Halladay near Phillippsville, where another 40 or 50 stonemasons cut the stones.

Jones Falls was a bigger lockstation than all the others, and eight canalmen were hired year round.

It also had a blacksmith’s shop, built in 1843. It still stands as it was, and this is where you’ll find Paul Rutkas. He will be dressed in the clothes the blacksmith would have worn, and he’ll be pounding his anvil so convincingly you’ll expect to look around and see Ketty and Thomas playing under the trees.

“The building is original except for the floor, shingles on the roof, and a new deadbolt on the door,” Mr. Rutkas says. “The shop is the last one of 120 you would have found along the canal. It’s older than Canada itself and has been classified in the same category as the Parliament Buildings.

Jones Falls started to be noticed for its breathtaking beauty and even before the turn of the century it was a popular tourist centre.

The stately Kenny Hotel, built in 1888, in the Kenney family for generations, was once the glamour spot of U.S. presidents and other famous people. IT is still a popular resort.

It, too has its stories. This one, told by Paul Rutkas, happened in 1975. A wedding guest with too much drink forgot the old stone bridge near the locks had been closed a year earlier.

He drove his Pontiac convertible through the barriers and took a nosedive right into the lock.

Fortunately, the lock was empty and dry,” Mr. Rutkas says. But a crane had to be hired to pull the car out. “And the driver walked away without a scratch.”

Visitors to Jones Falls need an afternoon or a whole day to appreciate all the stories of valor, strength, ingenuity and nonsense of this rugged lockstation.

It is a peaceful place, sitting almost invisibly from the road in the shade of ancient trees. You will want to spend time marveling at the huge stone dam built by John Redpath and the intricate system of locks. You'll want to see the blacksmith's shop, and the plaque showing where the old log guardhouse used to stand.

And you'll have to pay a visit to Peter and Catherine, or at least to their ghosts.

If you listen carefully, you might be able to hear them argue. Perhaps it will be about the children's religion; perhaps about Catherine's drinking habits. Maybe you will even hear her side of the story.

As Sue Warren says, they probably all went a little stir-crazy in the woods.