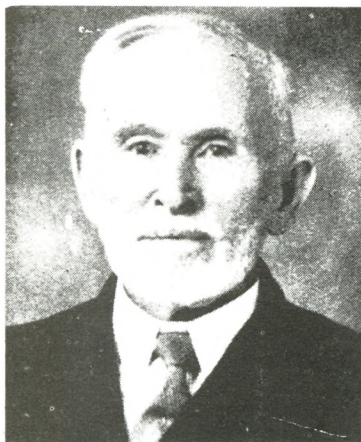


Surveyors of The Past

—BY CHARLES FAIRHALL—



WILLIAM GALBRAITH

The writer is indebted to Maurice W. Fitzmaurice, O.L.S., successor to the firm of Galbraith and Burgess for his assistance in furnishing copies of field notes, biographical data and anecdotes.

North of the Severn River and east of Georgian Bay lies the District of Muskoka, one of the most beautiful and popular vacation areas in Eastern Canada. Today, with its fine highways, it provides easy access to the multitudes of people from Southern Ontario and beyond who are drawn by its scenic beauty. To the early explorers, surveyors and first settlers, the myriad of lakes, rock outcrops and hardwood forests presented a formidable barrier and challenge. One of the early resident surveyors of the district was William Galbraith.

Mr. Galbraith was born in St. Mary's, Ontario, a son of the late Mr. and Mrs. Adam Galbraith. As a young man, he was for a time bookkeeper for a mercantile firm there and later moved to Haliburton. Here he acted as Station

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I thought commendable of them, after working all day and evening. Perhaps the penicillin had something to do with it. We left them polishing their mysteriously steamed-up glasses.

As we walked to our cars, Harry wondered if, on another occasion, we might want to try another place. "Just let me know", he said, "I'll arrange to get us a quiet table at the golf club".

"Harry", I said, with sudden intuition, "Our meetings will probably be in Ottawa. But if we have one around here, I have an idea that, after the re-fined cuisine and artistic license of this hotel, the editorial board members would have to be dragged to the golf club with wild horses".

Agent and Telegrapher for the Grand Trunk Railway. Since there was only one train a day on the railway, he found it possible to work part-time for one of the outstanding surveyors of the time, Alexander J. Niven.

Having decided to become a Land Surveyor himself, he articulated to Mr. Niven and received his commission as a Provincial Land Surveyor for Ontario on April 4, 1883.

In 1885, Mr. Galbraith moved to Bracebridge, then a small village into which the Northern and Pacific Railway had just been built, and established a practice as a land surveyor. In 1887 he married the former Miss Theresa Stewart of Haliburton and they built a handsome brick residence on Manitoba Street. Tragically, their three daughters predeceased them and when Mr. and Mrs. Galbraith passed away, they left their estate to the church where he was a devout member, and to various charities, and their home to the town. In time, the residence was sold and now serves as an apartment building.

Mr. Galbraith established a wide and varied practice and his services were greatly in demand in Muskoka and Parry Sound Districts and Haliburton County. He also surveyed a number of townships in the Temiskaming District for the provincial government. The Dominion Government often engaged his services to survey many of the 30,000 islands of Georgian Bay for National Park purposes, as well as Indian Reserves in Northern Ontario. In fact, the Dominion Government wanted him to join its permanent staff, but he did not wish to give up his large private practice.

Although small of stature, Mr. Galbraith possessed a rugged constitution and temperament which belied his size. He kept active right up until his last illness.

Like many rural surveyors of that time, Mr. Galbraith kept no permanent office or field staff, but rather relied on his client to furnish him with axemen and chainmen in order to keep the cost of the work to a minimum. Since money was not easy to come by for many settlers, Mr. Galbraith found it necessary to classify his work into three categories, namely, transit and steel tape or chain, compass and chain, and compass and pacing, depending on the accuracy required and the ability of his client to pay for his services. Sometimes he found it necessary to accept produce from a farmer in lieu of cash.

Mr. Galbraith was not a very patient man. He believed a person need only be shown twice how to perform a certain task. If he had to tell them a third time, he made sure they remembered. Many stories abound concerning Mr. Galbraith but perhaps the two following ones indicate something of his nature.

Once he was running a lot line between two farmers' lands and both men were assisting him along with their teenage sons. The fathers were chaining and the boys setting pickets and cutting out the line. Mr. Galbraith kept giving them instructions and around noontime the line crossed a field with a fenced limit.

While cutting out brush at the fence, the boys noticed a hornets nest overhanging the line. They very gingerly removed enough brush to sight over the fence and waited for Mr. Galbraith at the next set up. He came charging down the line and much to their delight blundered into the nest. Although not a profane man, Mr. Galbraith could express himself very forcibly and I'm sure those boys received a tongue-lashing that they can still remember.

On another occasion he was running a lot line in the late Spring, when most of the snow had disappeared. His client and helpers had set a picket in a patch of snow on the crest of a slope. As he was walking around his transit after taking a back sight in order to produce the line, his feet flew out from under him, disturbing his set up. Although only his pride was injured, someone made the error of laughing and Mr. Galbraith picked himself up, shouldered his transit and with a few words departed, much to the amazement of all present. Apparently he never returned to plant the corner post, but gave the client enough instructions to finish the job himself.

Mr. Galbraith possessed a remarkable memory and aided by references to rocks and trees, was often able to return and find the remains of an old corner post.

In 1930, advancing years and a heavy work load prompted Mr. Galbraith to take a partner into his practice and with E. L. Burgess, O.L.S., D.L.S., B.C.-L.S., M.L.S., the firm of Galbraith and Burgess was formed. In 1931, Mr. Burgess assumed control of the firm with Mr. Galbraith continuing to render assistance and give advice. On the 28th of January, 1944, after only a short illness, Mr. Galbraith died at his home. The flag on the Town Hall flew at half-mast in honour of the departed surveyor, town engineer and leading member of the community.