Newspapers.com by Ancestry
https://www.newspapers.com/image/456397485/

Downloaded on Dec 21, 2025

OLD-TIME STUFF

REMINISCENCES OF THE OTTAWA OF EARLIER DAYS. Personages, Scenes and Incidents Recalled for Evening Citizen Readers

FLOCKS OF WILD PIGEONS HID LIGHT OF SUN; A MOST WONDERFUL STORY OF EARLY SIXTIES; ANOTHER LIVE TALE OF BYTOWN AND DISTRICT

John and George Johnston, Brothers, Give Their Recollections of Early Days in Huntley and Bytown. Stories of the Early Police Force, and of Striking Incidents in the County Jail. About the Daguerreotype in 1849. The Funeral of David Borthwick, Killed on Stoney Monday.

Have any of the readers of the Old Time Stuff ever heard of the period when, in this locality, wild pigeons were so numerous that when they were flying south in the fall they actually darkened the sun?

Have they ever heard that during the "hard times," 1874-1878, conditions were so bad in Ottawa that men committed overt offences that they might be sent to jail and so obtain the food and warmth which they could not get outside of it?

Have they ever heard of the time, about 1870, when the female prisoners in the Ottawa jail made an attempt to break jail in a body?

The three bits of old time stuff indicated above form the high lights of today's feature story of the O.T.S. Today's main story, however, contains much other striking information concerning happenings in Ottawa and vicinity half a century and more ago.

Old Timers.

The narrators of today's story—for it is a joint story—are two Ottawa brothers, both of whom are octogenarians, both of whom have lived in Ottawa half a century and in the Ottawa district all their lives.

John Johnston and George Johnston herewith make their bow to the readers of the O.T.S.

John Johnston, who is in his 84th year, and lives at 275 Carling avenue, remembers Ottawa when there was no bridge where Pooley's bridge now is, and when to get to the Chaudiere people had to go down into the valley and cross the creek on a small cordurroy bridge. He also saw service on the Ottawa police force for a period of twelve years, under three chiefs of police. He tells O.T.S. readers some interesting things about the police force of the seventies and other things.

Has Seen Men.

George Johnston, of 291 Stewart street, who has now passed his 80th milestone, but is still remarkably vigorous in both body and mind, has been in the limelight in Ottawa for many years—first as a turnkey in the jail, later as sheriff's officer for over twenty-one years, and latterly (for sixteen years) as a canvasser for the Ottawa Hydro-Electric. During his years in the jail and in the sheriff's office, George Johnston saw many interesting things.

John and George Johnston are sons of William Johnston, who farmed first in Huntley, later near Blackburn and finally at Portlands on the Lievre River, where he died in 1871. Grandfather William Johnston was one of the early settlers of Gloucester in Huntley township.

The Wild Pigeons.

"The thing that I remember most clearly about the very early days," said Mr. John Johnston, "is about the wild pigeons which used to frequent these parts when I was a boy.

"What I saw of wild pigeons when I was a boy on the farm in Huntley between 1844 and 1848, many people will probably not credit. But others who are as old as myself will know that I do not exaggerate in the least.

"You have heard how in the old days on the western plains millions of buffaloes roamed. Well, it was the same way as regards the pigeons in Ontario and probably in other parts of Canada. Literally there were millions of them.

Did the Sun.

"When they started south in the fall they flew in such numbers that they were like a great black cloud overhead, actually covering miles in extent and hiding the sun from view. The noise of their wings was actually indescribable.

"When they landed at night in a bush they loaded the trees so heavily that they actually broke big limbs off.

"These pigeons were terrible pests to the farmers. They would often land by ninety thousands in a field of standing grain and in ten minutes they would be literally stripped.

"I remember about 1844 firing into a flock of these pests, and so thick were they that I killed 17 at one shot. This statement may seem incredible in these days when the wild pigeon is extinct, as far as I know. But it is the literal truth.

Where Did They Go?

"Even up to fifty years ago (1874) the wild pigeons were very numerous. After that they seemed to disappear all of a sudden. To explain their disappearance there was a story current that on one of their migrations south they got into a heavy fog, got lost, and flew out over the Atlantic and perished. Whether that explanation is right is hard to say. We know, however, that they were killed right and left by farmers everywhere, partly for food and partly for sickness. Many farmers killed them wholesale in the trees at night. Wild animals also killed many of them.

Rabbits at Chaudiere.

"When I came to the Chaudiere first in the fifties, the only thing on the whole Chaudiere was a little grist mill operated by Daniel McLachlin. There was not another water wheel anywhere on the Flats, and in fact the whole of the Flats was so overgrown with swamp cedars that one could not see the Chaudiere Falls without going to the bridge. The road from the bridge to Wellington street was narrow and was cut through the cedar swamp.

"The Chaudiere swamp then swarmed with rabbits. There were thousands of them."

No Sparks Street.

Mr. Johnston, when came into Ottawa with his father when a boy, and he has a keen recollection of the time when Sparks street, west of Bank, was practically a blank. In the early fifties, the corner of Sparks and Elgin streets was the rallying point for Upper Town. On one corner was Campbell's stone hotel, and on another (the southwest corner) Scott's bakery, a little two-storey white frame building. During the sixties an uncle of Mr. Johnston (George Clark) kept a three-storey frame hotel at the corner of Sparks and O'Connor streets where part of Poulin's big store now stands. This was known as the International, and was one of the leading hotels of the city till it was burned down about the end of the sixties.

On Pulpe Force.

In 1876 Mr. Johnston, after having spent several years in the States, came to Ottawa to live. At that time, and for many years afterwards, the pulp mills were practically almost entirely from the Americas. Being a Johnston he was interested in ships. Mr. Johnston had no trouble in getting a place on the force. At that period the chief of police was Donald M. Grant.

During the period he was on the force Mr. Johnston was the force there were about 40 men, including Chief Grant, Wm. McVeity and Percy Sherwood (now Sir Percy).

Sixteen Policemen.

Mr. Johnston tells us that in 1876 there were only sixteen men on the force. These were kept pretty busy for at that time the lumber business was in its prime and the police had a lot of trouble with the shantymen. There were over a hundred places in Ottawa then where liquor was sold by the glass and there were many drunks to take care of and disturbances of the peace to quell. The police force, so to speak, was in place, so to speak, as a minority of one. Policemen had to be able to handle the toughest characters. He had to be lively and not slow in sprint. He had to be big enough to command the respect of the unruly.

Troublesome Women.

The worst trouble the sixteen policemen had in the seventies was with drunken women, of whom there were a considerable number. Some of them were terrible characters from all accounts. They would resist arrest, fight, scratch and kick and often from two to three cops were required to bring them in.

The policemen did not like a woman job, and as a rule let these female drunks alone unless they began to annoy people or do damage.

Mr. George Johnston tells of one celebrated character who was a frequent visitor to the jail while he was turnkey there between '76 and '82.

A Rip-raver.

From all accounts this woman was a "rip-raver." She should have been in the asylum instead of in the jail. But in those days the cage of the insane had not reached the stage of understanding that it has today.

This woman, who was middle aged, got so obstreperous at times that she had to be put in cells. In her trouble specially was smashing the windows in the jail cells. On one occasion she stuffed the keyhole of the lock on the door of her cell so that the turnkeys could not insert a key, then leisurely proceeded to insure herself by smashing the windows with a tin drinking cup.

Smashed 49 Windows.

Before the turnkeys could clear the keyhole she had smashed no less than 49 panes of glass. On occasions she had was not allowed her freedom when she was a queer of the jail. Most of the time she needed to be a clean up around the waist and he tied to the bars of her cell, and then, if she did scale around a bit, yet not be able to reach the windows.

Cops' Sixth Sense.

Mr. George Johnston continuing his story of the police force, expressed a sort of sixth sense the policemen developed in discovering crime.

"One night, in 1878 I think it was, I was on the beat on Sparks street. I had none of the side streets to cover. The night was bitterly cold—about 20 below zero. I had succeeded, after midnight, in getting warmed up a bit, yet not be able to reach the windows.

Cops' Sixth Sense.

Mr. George Johnston continuing his story of the police force, expressed a sort of sixth sense the policemen developed in discovering crime.

"One night, in 1878 I think it was, I was on the beat on Sparks street. I had none of the side streets to cover. The night was bitterly cold—about 20 below zero. I had succeeded, after midnight, in getting warmed up a bit, yet not be able to reach the windows.

Thief Was Caught.

"When I became a turnkey in October, 1876, I found the jail pretty lively. state of affairs," said Mr. Johnston. "Twenty people used to come out of jail. But at that time people, both men and women, used to get into jail, pretending to be the bully of Bytown and disturbing the peace in order to get 'sent up.'

"At that time Ottawa, in common with all Canada, was in the throes of the famous hard times which prevailed during the Mackenzie regime. There was no work, no money going on anywhere and business was at a standstill.

"A man or woman who could not make a living was better off in jail than there was food and shelter. Many of them made a bid for the free board of the jail.

Made Good Prisoners.

"Many of these people when released after a three week stay would be well enough to get out and do something rather than go back to get sent back again.

"Magistrate O'Gara, who had more knowledge of human nature and more horse sense than any man I ever met, used to size up the needs of each case. In many instances he would give the unfortunate fellow three weeks of shelter with us. They didn't get any Russell House board, but they got good hard skilly, soup and little meat they had no chance to get further than what they got outside."

A Wolf Story.

Mr. John Johnston put this joint recalled the days in the fifties when timber wolves still roamed the country round Ottawa. When he was a boy on the farm in Huntley wolves were still numerous and very often from two to three cops were required to bring them in.

The policemen did not like a woman job, and as a rule let these female drunks alone unless they began to annoy people or do damage.

Mr. George Johnston tells of one celebrated character who was a frequent visitor to the jail while he was turnkey there between '76 and '82.

A Rip-raver.

From all accounts this woman was a "rip-raver." She should have been in the asylum instead of in the jail. But in those days the cage of the insane had not reached the stage of understanding that it has today.

This woman, who was middle aged, got so obstreperous at times that she had to be put in cells. In her trouble specially was smashing the windows in the jail cells. On one occasion she stuffed the keyhole of the lock on the door of her cell so that the turnkeys could not insert a key, then leisurely proceeded to insure herself by smashing the windows with a tin drinking cup.

Smashed 49 Windows.

Before the turnkeys could clear the keyhole she had smashed no less than 49 panes of glass. On occasions she was not allowed her freedom when she was a queer of the jail. Most of the time she needed to be a clean up around the waist and be tied to the bars of her cell, and then, if she did scale around