

Peterborough in January 1875: a 1948 view of the Peterborough Times

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Blame Polluted Water for Liquor Popularity But That Was Back in 1875

Eggs at ten cents a dozen and a trans-Atlantic trip in "luxurious cabin accommodations" for \$55 are two items guaranteed to start the usual bombardment of heart-rending sights for "the-good-old-days." They are just two of many fascinating glimpses into living conditions in Peterborough less than three-quarters of a century ago, as mirrored in the yellowed pages of the Peterborough Times issues of January 1875.

The Times, a most determined journal with the defiant motto "Either Live or Die with Honour," featured a snappy serial episode on more the half the front page – a dramatic bit of literary effort entitled: "The French Maiden and Prussian Officer – A Story of the Franco-German War." The rest of page one is taken up with advertisements (with dream-quality prices) and an earnest attempt at poetry by a Lindsay gentleman who made up what he lacked in poetic ability with an overdose of poetic zeal.

Evidently the most active livery operator in Peterborough in 1875 was D. G. Henthorn. Three separate notices appear in one issue advising the public that their convenience has again been assured by extension of his public cab chain to another hotel. "Good horses and comfortable conveyance, with or without drivers" was the promise.

The ten hotels of the city listed in the "classified section" on the front page feature in their notices the quality, quantity and variety of liquor available at their respective—and it is presumed, respectable—bars. The hotels were not backward in describing themselves, either, mentioning "lavish appointment," "elegant accommodations," "choicest luxuries." Price, for one day including meals, room and free bus fare to and from the hotel: \$1.

The saloons of Peterborough, also accorded a place of honor in the columns of the Times, went into painstaking detail in describing their bills-of-fare.

The issue of 30 January 1875 entreats readers to patronise a new "public eating house" which quoted its rates at 20 cents "for a substantial meal." Board was available there for \$3 a week, too.

Suspicious hints of dark price-cutting are present in a candid advertisement of a city dentist: "A competition for cheapness and not for excellence of workmanship is detrimental to both patient and operator..."

The City Council of today would probably give their collective eye-tooth for just one of the many building lots advertised at give-away prices.

The editorial of that issue, worrying over current problems of the day, presented a unique appeal to the "Town" Council to rush the matter of purifying the water supply: "The contamination of the victim's mind and body ... makes him incapable of exerting his full will-power ... and stimulating a craving for alcoholic drink." The editor continues, logically, that "it is comparatively useless to caution men against the use of strong drinks when we have no pure beverage to offer them as a substitute."

Another editorial note seems quite in keeping with today, however, as it dolefully remarks: "The peace of Europe and Asia seems to be in a very precarious state at present...."

The social event of the week was emblazoned on Page Two: Miss Annie DeMontford, performing at the Music Hall. Modestly proclaimed as "The Unexplained Mystery of the 19th Century, the Famous English Mesmerist, the Great European Sensation, the Envy of the Scientists, the Wonder of the Educated, the Incomprehensible Mystery of the Masses," this extravaganza was available at 25 and 50 cents per seat.

The Victoria Railway was abuilding near Kinmount in 1875, and advertised for "300 good men."

Advertising writers were almost as extravagant in their phraseology as some claim they are today. There were, apparently, many "genuine sacrifice sales" and as many "we-will-sell-at-cost" ads as found today. One fur dealer, deciding that honesty is the best policy, told his patrons frankly that he was reducing at cost prices – only his notice drily remarks: "He (himself) below cost, as he would have either to steal the furs or humbug the public."

The Times was its own best advertising customer, in one issue at least, taking up the largest space of any ad. It concludes a column-long eulogy on the benefits of advertising in the Times with the haughty words: "Whoever you are, do not imagine that the announcement of your business in a respectable newspaper will lower you in the public estimation. If you are too genteel to advertise, the sooner you abandon the trade, the better."

Items from a weekly service of market reports at Peterborough will arouse some sort of emotion today: butter, 20 cents; beef, five and six cents; pork, seven and eight cents; turkeys, 60 cents each; geese, 40 cents; ducks, 50 cents; chickens, 30 cents per pair; hay, \$8 per ton; sawed hardwood, per load, \$2; sheepskins, \$1.

The issue also announced and reported in detail the organization of the Peterborough Game and Fish Protective Society with recorded arguments on problems of conservation and rebuilding of depleted natural resources, much in line with present-day moves.

The Times took the opportunity to editorialize somewhat. "A large quantity of venison is still being brought into town, the greater portion of it at least being killed recently when the deep snow renders the deer almost helpless. It is full time that steps were taken to check this lawless slaughter.

