

## TRAVEL

### Lovingly kept old buildings still enchant

By William Lowry. 6 May 1995, *The Toronto Star*

In 1841, Thomas Ingersoll pitched his tent on the banks of Trout Creek where it enters the Thames. He built a cabin, a sawmill and a gristmill, attracting more than 100 souls to share his wilderness. They called their fledgling community "Little Falls" after three small waterfalls on the Thames River.

Little Falls soon became known as St. Marys and many stories suggest how it received that name. John McDonald, the township's original surveyor, named many little towns in the Huron Tract, Marystown, Marysville or St. Marys, after his wife, hoping that at least one would stick.

Another story tells of the town needing a school and Mary Jones, wife of a Canada Company official, offered 10 toward its construction if settlers would change the name of the town to St. Marys. George Dartnell sketched, in 1842, a picture of the town's buildings and a bridge across the Thames and titled it "New Settlement of St. Marys."

In any case, this beautiful little town lovingly referred to as Stonetown reflects the town slogan, inscribed on its historic water tower: St. Marys: the town worth living in.

I feel I have ventured into the past, even before crossing the bridge and passing the water tower. The streets are lined with beautiful old stone houses and the sandstone town hall towers over me like a medieval castle. I expect the women to be wearing gowns that sweep the ground and men in top hats, tipping them in greeting, but modern cars line the streets and people wearing the latest fashions greet me with a pleasant "Good morning."

Queen St. is main street in St. Marys and the handsome facades of 100-year-old Victorian buildings are prominent on both sides of the street. Stonemasons from Scotland quarried local limestone and built beautiful homes for generations of St. Marys populations. This Stonetown mellows with age.

William Andrews' jewelry store has remained virtually unchanged since 1884. Its magnificent clock and bell tower are a masterpiece of construction, and inside the shop, original walnut-trimmed showcases still display watches and jewelry.

At the Perth Country Gallery, illustrator Colin McQuirk, creator of fine pen and ink drawings of historical St. Marys, can be found hard at work. Next door in an 1860 building that adds unity to the streetscape, a small new cafe, Smith & Latham, has opened.

Serving breakfast and lunch from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. its success seems guaranteed as the lineup for lunch extends into the street. Across the street, St. Marys Chocolate Factory caters to chocaholics. At the corner of

Water St., Colonial Plates and Dolls is world-renowned for its business in international collector plates.

A morning sun floods the old Opera House in a cloak of gold. This spectacular building on the west side of Water St. is one of the most glorious architectural accomplishments of the 19th century. Teams of matched horses once stopped here and footmen opened carriage doors for the gentry.

Many famous performers were seen here: the Marx Brothers cavorted on its stage, Uncle Tom's Cabin brought tragic drama and the oratory of our infamous prime minister, Sir John A. Macdonald, added a distinctive bit of spice to the proceedings. The building has been restored to its original splendor but, alas, it is now an apartment complex.

One block south of Queen St. around the corner on Jones is St. Marys' Saturday market, where local farmers arrive by car, pickup, minivan or horse and buggy. Fresh fruit and vegetables of all kinds, herbs, an array of pickles, jams and other farm preserves are offered while steaming buns and bread fresh from the oven are accompanied by cookies, pies and all kinds of baked goods.

Situated only 20 minutes from Stratford and the festival, St. Marys has become a bed and breakfast sanctuary. Many of the old homes have offered their bedrooms to theatre traffic and it has quickly become the place to stay. I was a guest at Harwood Manor, historic home of Jackie and Neville Kirkman. Completely restored to its original era and tastefully decorated, it is a charming retreat.

At another B&B, Park St. Maples, Harold May led me up a scarlet carpeted stairway to my room at the rear of the house overlooking his well-manicured garden. His wife, Doris, serves breakfast here amid a profusion of flowers that surrounded the garden patio.

In 1867, the Hutton family constructed a Victorian limestone mansion on the almost 8 hectares of Westover Park. This beautiful family home with a spectacular conservatory originally passed into private hands in 1938 and is now operated as a country inn called Westover Inn.

Now St. Marys is to be blessed as the home of the Canadian Baseball Hall of Fame. Thirteen hectares have been donated by the St. Marys Cement Company for a hall, museum and a 2,000-seat stadium. Canadians can rejoice in the fact that baseball was played in this area years before Abner Doubleday supposedly invented the game in Cooperstown, N.Y. in 1839.

\* St. Marys is located west of Highway 7 on Highway 19, 16 kilometres (10 miles) south of Stratford. Local information on St. Marys may be obtained by writing: Town of St. Marys, PO Box 998, St. Marys, Ont. N4X 1B6 or phone (519) 284-3500 Fax: (519) 284-2881.

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