



## *Let Us Break Bread Together: The Glenarm Picnics*

By Ian McKechnie, Lindsay, Ontario



Figure 1: The Alex McFadyen Trophy (City of Kawartha Lakes Artifact Collection, 2001.015.003)

How might a polished trophy and a rusty old batting cage be symbolic of the communion of saints the worldwide Church celebrates annually during the first few days of November?

Like an inscribed hymnbook, a casserole dish, or the pew one family has occupied for generations, these simple objects bind us – in ways we don’t always fully comprehend – to those who have gone before. These things become especially meaningful when a congregation dissolves after more than a century and a half of service.

Such was the case in August 2022, when Knox Presbyterian Church in Glenarm, Ontario, shut its doors for the final time. Long after the last parishioners had filed out, the doors locked, and the building sold, the batting cage remained *in situ*, silhouetted against the morning sunrise. To some, it may be little more than an eyesore, a derelict piece of scrap metal. To generations of Presbyterians in Glenarm, the batting cage would have been emblematic of the fellowship and friendship that was fostered through the annual Glenarm picnics and baseball tournaments.

There is some debate about just when the picnics began taking place. For decades, local tradition placed their origin in 1885, eight years before the present church building opened its doors.<sup>1</sup> Another source asserted in 1924 that “this picnic has been a fixture for forty years or more.”<sup>2</sup> Yet

1. “Glenarm picnic celebrates 76<sup>th</sup> anniversary,” *Lindsay Daily Post*, July 6 1961, 6.
2. “Society – Glenarm Picnic,” *Lindsay Daily Post*, June 6 1924, 2.

one Richard Smithson, formerly a resident of Glenarm, informed the local press in 1963 that the picnics had in fact been held for over 80 years – meaning that the parishioners of Knox could well have been assembling to open their picnic baskets as early as 1883, if not some years before.<sup>3</sup>

north of what might be described as “downtown” Glenarm. Not until much later did the annual picnic move to the grounds surrounding the Gothic Revival church; one source implies that picnics were taking place here as early as the 1910s, though longtime parishioners recall that



Figure 2: Knox Presbyterian Church, Glenarm, as seen from the air, ca. 2023. Note the baseball field immediately west of the church, with the old batting cage visible adjacent to the trees between the church and County Road 8. Image courtesy Maryboro Lodge: The Fenelon Museum.

Regardless of when the first picnic happened, we do know that it was an offsite affair. Joe Nesbitt was said to have hosted the first picnic in his bush, a short distance east of Glenarm proper. Some 20 people showed up, word got out, and the following year there were 200 people in attendance.<sup>4</sup> 1897 saw 700 people flocking to the picnic.<sup>5</sup> Perhaps owing to the numbers, a new venue was soon required and by the turn of the twentieth century the picnics were taking place on the grounds of Mr. Angus McKay, a short distance

the McKay grove played host for decades to come.<sup>6</sup> The baseball games, meanwhile, were played at the McKay site until the latter part of the 1950s, when they too relocated to an expansive field immediately west of the church.

3. “Residents learn community has held picnic for over 80 years,” *Lindsay Daily Post*, July 5 1963, 4.

4. *Ibid*, 4.

5. “Glenarm – Picnic,” *The Watchman*, July 8 1897, 2.

6. According to the July 5 1963 account in the *Lindsay Daily Post*: “Everyone took their own supper to the picnic in those days and for over 50 years supper has been served in the church grounds with the ball games at the McKay grounds until a few years ago when the ball games have been played at the west of the church field.” Catherine Boston, granddaughter of Angus McKay, recalled, however, that the picnics took place on her family’s property as late as the early 1960s.

Though organized under the auspices of Knox and its parishioners, the picnics quickly grew to being something in which the whole community could take part – regardless of one’s denominational background. A cursory glance at the attendance figures reported over the years testifies to the popularity of the Presbyterians’ picnics: in 1908, over 1,500 people were present “from all sections of the county, many being present from Lindsay, Fenelon Falls, Victoria Road, Kirkfield, Lorneville and Woodville.”<sup>7</sup> A couple of years prior, Col. Sam Hughes, M.P. – infamous for his scandalous conduct as Minister of Militia during the First World War – showed up at the picnic with a camera in hand and claimed that some 5,000 people were present.<sup>8</sup> (In a sense, the Glenarm picnics provided a symbolic foretaste of when God’s people would “come from east and west and north and south, and will take their places at the feast in the kingdom of God.”)<sup>9</sup>

While minor variations in the programme were introduced over the years, the basic format remained the same for most of the Glenarm picnic’s history. The picnics always took place on Dominion Day, with the much-anticipated baseball tournaments transpiring over the course of the afternoon. In what was purported to be the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Glenarm picnic, in 1935, a “monster baseball tournament” was held in which the Cambray, Glenarm, Hartley, Kirkfield, and Woodville teams competed for the cup donated by Alex McFadyen of the Great West Life Assurance Co. The Ladies’ Aid held a bazaar and sponsored a fish pond booth, while supper was served from 5 o’clock through 8 o’clock in the evening.<sup>10</sup> This

three-hour serving schedule testified to the sheer numbers of people expected at these picnics. In 1897, it was implied that two meals were served on picnic day. “Dinner and supper was served in the cool shady grove, and the waiters were kept on the jump all afternoon and evening,” observed one correspondent of the proceedings.<sup>11</sup> Sometimes the sports and games carried on well into the evening: “After partaking of a most delicious repast, prepared by the good ladies of the congregation, a football match was in action between Fenelon football players and a local team,” noted another observer.<sup>12</sup>

The menu at the Glenarm picnics remained unchanged for years and was typical of similar events hosted by Presbyterian churches across Canada. Copious amounts of potato and other varieties of salad were followed by a main course of ham. The ladies of the congregation were said to have made up to a dozen pies *each*; the pie might have been enjoyed with ice cream. Carbonated beverages were still very much a thing of the future, but tea was always enjoyed by those whose mouths were parched.

For many years, a programme of musical entertainment got underway in the church once supper had been cleared away. “Miss Katherine McKay presided at the organ for the singing of ‘O Canada’ after which Rev. [Grant] McDonald welcomed the gathering and the splendid crowd despite the many other attractions held on Dominion Day in nearby centres,” reported the *Lindsay Daily Post* on July 6, 1961.<sup>13</sup> Decades before, musical entertainment at the Glenarm picnics invariably included the skirl of the great Highland bagpipe as Mr. Fraser and the kilted Sons of Scotland led picnickers to the grove where feast and fellowship awaited.<sup>14</sup>

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7. “Successful Picnic and Tournament at Glenarm,” *Watchman Warder*, July 8 1908, 1.

8. “Little Local Lines,” *Watchman Warder*, July 19 1906,

9. See also Victoria County Historical Society, *Knox Presbyterian*, YouTube video, 9:20, from the VCHS’s oral history project, “Precious Memories: Our Seniors Speak,” posted by VCHS, July 13 2019.

9. St. Luke 13:29 (New International Version).

10. Victoria County Historical Society, *Knox Presbyterian*, YouTube video, 9:35, from the VCHS’s oral history project, “Precious Memories: Our Seniors Speak,” posted by VCHS, July 13 2019.

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11. “Glenarm – Picnic,” *The Watchman*, July 8 1897, 2.

12. “Glenarm – Annual Picnic,” *The Watchman*, July 5 1894, 1.

13. “Glenarm picnic celebrates 76<sup>th</sup> anniversary,” *Lindsay Daily Post*, July 6 1961, 6.

14. “Glenarm – Annual Picnic,” *The Watchman*, July 5 1894, 1.

Not unlike the multitudes that gathered in the gospel stories to feed on loaves and fishes, picnickers in the formative years brought baskets with them and assembled at the appointed time and location to enjoy the company of their friends, neighbours, and fellow parishioners. By mid-century, though, planning and executing the picnics had become an exacting science. A report published in 1951 notes that several subcommittees were formed to oversee the day's festivities. The Ladies' Aid was in charge of preparing supper, while S.N. Morrison, Mac Murchison, and Clifford Hargrave would run the various sporting events. The Rev'd. Max Putnam, (then a young minister and later Moderator of the 98<sup>th</sup> General Assembly) developed the programme for the day in consultation with Mrs. J.E. Nesbitt and Mrs. J.D. McMillan, while other parishioners were assigned to ticket-selling and collecting duties, ensuring adequate water supply, and advertising the picnic far and wide.<sup>15</sup>

While baseball games apparently took place adjacent to Knox well into the 1970s, the famous picnics faded into history after 1968. There were simply not enough people to facilitate an event of this size for the foreseeable future. Even as that ministry had come to a close, the spirit of the Glenarm picnics lived on through other functions. An annual corn roast and hymn-sing took place in August right up to 2019. Supper was enjoyed in the parish hall downstairs before everyone adjourned to the sanctuary for an evening of music led by the late Sandy and Shirley Abernethy (parents of renowned Canadian sculptor, Ruth Abernethy).<sup>16</sup> The COVID-19 pandemic, alas, combined with an aging congregation to spell the end of the corn roasts and within two years, Knox had closed for good.

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15. "Committees for Glenarm Picnic," *The Thursday Post*, June 13 1951, 3.

16. Victoria County Historical Society, *Knox Presbyterian*, YouTube video, 21:15, from the VCHS's oral history project, "Precious Memories: Our Seniors Speak," posted by VCHS, July 13 2019.

The Glenarm picnics were not unique to this congregation or community. Similar events took place across the country, undoubtedly with local or regional variations. They are worth remembering; not so much to make us pine for simpler times, but to recall how these gatherings – whether over picnic baskets in shady groves, or in neatly-manicured lawns beside churches – in their own way anticipated the great banquet in which God's people will one day share:

*Feast after feast thus comes and passes by,  
Yet passing, points to the glad feast above,  
Giving sweet foretaste of the festal joy,  
The Lamb's great bridal-feast of bliss and love.*<sup>17</sup>

(The author wishes to thank Mrs. Catherine Boston, née McKay, and Laura Love, Economic Development Officer for Curatorial Services, City of Kawartha Lakes, for their invaluable assistance in preparing this article.)

### **Editor's Note**

This is the first issue of *Presbyterian History* that I have assembled since taking over as editor from the Rev'd. Peter Bush earlier this year. I am much indebted to Peter for his tremendous assistance, encouragement, and insights throughout this transition period, and I hope to build on the legacy he has left to the PCC through his faithful devotion to this newsletter.

It is my goal to see as much of the Presbyterian Church in Canada as possible reflected in the pages of this publication. Does your congregation have an interesting story or bit of folklore that you think your Presbyterian friends across the country would find interesting? What about a minister, director of music, educator, or missionary of note? How about the history of a longstanding tradition from church, camp, or youth ministry that has yet to be written down for posterity? Does your building have a story about its art and architecture, its furnishings and

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17. Horatius Bonar, "Here, O My Lord, I See Thee."

memorials, that is worth sharing with the broader church? No story is not important enough to tell and retell. Indeed, storytelling and sharing will become vitally important as congregations face uncertain futures and as the PCC adapts to the changing world around it. These stories – such as that about the Glenarm picnics – bind us together with the communion of saints who have gone before us and with those who will come after us. So please, keep those stories coming!

– Ian McKechnie

## **In Remembrance**

Every year, dozens of churches are closed across Canada. Even as we grieve their loss, it is important to remember their faithful witness in the communities they served. Starting with this issue, *Presbyterian History* will make it an annual practice to provide a list of congregations that are no more. In some cases, the congregation may have been dissolved outright; in other cases, a beloved place of worship may have been left behind through amalgamation and may no longer be used for Presbyterian services. (This list is derived from information provided by the General Assembly Office, and may not reflect changes made to the roll since this issue was completed.)

### ***Presbytery of Pictou***

Calvin, Sunnybrae. Amalgamated with St. Paul's, Springville, December 11, 2022.

### ***Presbytery of Montreal***

St. Andrew's, Hemmingford. Formed 1823. Dissolved, December 31, 2022.

Maisonneuve, Montreal. Amalgamated with La Communauté chrétienne Siloë Canada, January 1, 2023.

### ***Presbytery of Ottawa***

Rockland, Rockland. Formed as a preaching point in 2010 and as a congregation in 2014. Dissolved, March 31, 2023.

### ***Presbytery of Oak Ridges***

Caven, Bolton. Amalgamated with St. Paul's, Nobleton, April 23, 2023.

### ***Presbytery of Eastern Han-Ca***

Korean, Oshawa. Formed 1986. Dissolved, May 31, 2023.

### ***Presbytery of Hamilton***

Alberton, Alberton. Formed 1855. Dissolved, June 25, 2023.

### ***Presbytery of Westminster***

Gordon, Burnaby; Knox New Westminster; and St. Aidan's, New Westminster. Amalgamated to become Trinity, January 1, 2023.

### ***Presbytery of Kamloops***

Kitimat, Kitimat. Dissolved, August 23, 2023.

*"These stones that have echoed their praises are holy,  
And dear is the ground where their feet have once trod;  
Yet here they confessed they were strangers and pilgrims,  
And still they were seeking the city of God."*

– Rev'd. William H. Draper, 1916

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