

Fires, brawls and alcohol in wild west of Adjala

By Brian Lockhart

This is the second to two articles about the the lost town of Ballycroy, which was near the intersection of Highway 9 and 50.

When fire destroyed Ballycroy's Small Hotel and several other buildings in April of 1875, it also destroyed much of the heart of the small, but bustling frontier town.

The cause of the fire was never determined, but arson was considered, especially given that local entrepreneurs were known to be protective of their competing businesses.

When it was discovered that Peter Small held \$21,000 in mortgages on the hotel ? a huge sum at the time ? the rumour mill went into overdrive. Small finally decided to leave town two years later, never to return.

Local stories still pass on the tragedy of the three girls who perished in the hotel fire. They were milliners (hat makers) who lived on top of the hotel. Except that they were hardly girls. Mary Fanning was 32 years old, Bridget Burke was 28, and Margaret Daly was the youngest at 24.

You have to read between the lines of this story for a more historical take on the tale.

In the 1870s, most pioneer women were already married and had children by age 20. Fanning, at 32, would have been considered an old spinster in her time. Why a town of only 200 people required three hat makers, all living above a hotel, leaves open a few other questions. But those answers are lost in time.

The three ladies were buried in St. James' Cemetery in Colgan with the grave marker easily located behind the church.

Not everyone in Ballycroy had a rough and tumble time making a living. In fact, many businesses prospered.

Businessman John McClelland opened a successful general store, ran the post office and apparently got along with all of his neighbours regardless of religious affiliation. His large home featured an upstairs dance hall and meeting room and also doubled as a hotel. It is the only standing building left of the town and is easily identified by its large frontier style facade.

McClelland's son eventually took over the store and over the next 100 years it was bought and sold many times.

The current owners of the property are Mo Vikrant and Elle Patille, a young couple who moved up from Toronto when they bought the place in May. They are currently renovating, but are careful to keep the original fixtures and design.

?The potential, the land, the history of the house,? Mo said of why they were so impressed during their first visit. They made an offer the next day.

The house is 185 years old and has many unique challenges and more than enough character to fill a novel with descriptive phrases. Elle was nice enough to offer a tour of the building and pointed out many features of the house.

The building is solid, with exterior walls that are about a foot thick. The rooms, and there are a lot of them, have full nine-foot ceilings and two separate stair cases lead to the floor. The dance and meeting hall still has the original floor, as does the rest of the house.

Inside the old post office and general store, the original shelves are still on the walls and the original wood counters have been put back in place. The building is a time capsule of life long ago.

The couple are well aware of the historic significance of the building and have become accustomed to curious history buffs stopping and taking photos.

So why did Ballycroy eventually fade away, leaving only the spirits of long ago residents to wander through a main street that no longer exists?

When the railways of the 19th century started connecting the nation in a way that was never before possible, the decision was made to run the line being built between Hamilton and Allandale south past Ballycroy to Palgrave.

That decision forced many businesses to leave Ballycroy to take advantage of the opportunities the opening of the railway offered. From there, the town slowly disappeared.

The Orange Lodge was finally declared dormant in 1943, and the post office closed in 1951.

All that is left of the main street is an overgrown path that slopes gently down through a wooded area and a single sign with the town's name that lets visitors know that this place once existed.