

Mackenzie needed lots of help to escape to Buffalo in 1837

By Bill Rea

The famed rebellion of 1837 took place near Montgomery's Tavern in Toronto.

It's well known that William Lyon Mackenzie led the rebellion, and was able to escape and make it to Buffalo and safety about four days later. What's not quite as well known is how he actually got there. Many stories have been raised over the last couple of centuries of Mackenzie turning up in various places all over Southern Ontario right after the rebellion. In fact, if he had travelled to all those places, the trip to Buffalo would have taken months, instead of days.

That was the message author and historian Chris Raible had when he recently addressed the Caledon East and District Historical Society.

There's the story of William Wentworth, who was out walking his dog at his home in what is now Weston when he saw a horse and rider approach. He recognized the horse as one he sold three weeks earlier to William Hogg (after whom Hoggs Hollow was named). The rider was Mackenzie, "an old acquaintance, but not a good friend," of Wentworth's. But he did wish him well after learning that the rebellion had failed and Mackenzie was on the run.

A couple of nights later, Mackenzie showed up looking dishevelled at the home of Robert Elliott near Oakville. Elliott's wife Betsy was there, and Mackenzie asked if he could borrow a pair of her husband's trousers. Betsy repaired the visitor's pants, then sent her son to fetch a horse from the barn and the two rode off together. A sheriff showed up a little later, believing Mackenzie was there, and searched the house.

"If he was (here), do you think I'd tell you," Betsy is supposed to have told the sheriff.

A few days later, on a cold night along the Niagara Peninsula, a man answered the pounding on his door and found a tired, bedraggled man seeking food and shelter. It was Mackenzie, and his host locked him in a room, then went looking for a neighbour to help him turn the fugitive in. But the man's wife let him out, gave him some of her clothes, and he was able to escape and get across the border.

Raible made it clear he's fond of all three of those stories. The only problem is none of them are true.

Mackenzie was born in Scotland in 1795, and travelled to Upper Canada in 1820, settling in York. He operated a general store on King Street, then moved to Dundas and opened another store, before moving to Queenston and starting a business there.

Mackenzie was an only child, and he was eventually joined by his mother, who travelled to Canada with Isabel Baxter. Mackenzie and Baxter got married, and Raible didn't know if it was a case of love at first sight, or an arrangement.

Raible said Mackenzie was a typical Canadian.

"He didn't like the government," he observed, adding Mackenzie decided to try and do something about it.

He started a newspaper called the Colonial Advocate, which was successful. He also got the authorities upset to the point that a band of men went to his print shop and destroyed some of his equipment.

"It may have been the best thing that ever happened to him," Raible observed, adding he successfully sued for damages.

Mackenzie was elected to the House of Assembly for York County in 1828. He tried to challenge the government from that position, but the House in those days had no real power. He was re-elected in 1830, although the strength of his reform faction had been reduced.

Raible said he continued to criticize the government, and was constantly expelled from the Assembly. But he kept winning the by-elections to pick his replacement.

"They went through this charade five times," Raible said.

He said Mackenzie decided the only way to bring about change was through an appeal to the colonial government. He circulated a petition and took it to England. He received a sympathetic welcome that outraged Conservatives at home, and most of the changes had been wiped out by the time he returned home.

Mackenzie eventually decided that change was up to the people of Upper Canada.

He was elected Alderman and first Mayor of Toronto, but was not re-elected in 1834. But he was elected to the Assembly, and by this time the reformers had a majority.

Raible said that around this time, authorities in England had decided to install a new Lieutenant Governor who would support reform. They appointed Francis Bond Head, who ended up doing the opposite of what he was supposed to do, aligning himself with the Family Compact. He also called an election and involved himself in the campaign, stressing duty to the crown against nasty American democracy.

Mackenzie lost his seat in that election, along with the hope of bringing about change by legislative means. He decided the only

thing to do was cut off ties between Upper Canada and Britain. That meant revolt, and he tried to rally support of foes of the Family Compact, but it didn't work.

Raible said it was "ill planned, ill fated."

"It was a dismal failure," he added.

He led the march down Yonge Street, and Raible said both sides fired, and then ran.

On the run, Mackenzie knew he had to get to Buffalo, which was about 85 miles away as the crow flies, or "165 miles as the rebel flies."

Raible said Mackenzie was able to get a horse from Stillwell Wilson that Thursday evening (Dec. 7) and ride to what is now Sheppard Avenue. He was able to get across the Don River and stopped at the farm of Jacob Sheppard. He then went north to another farm, then crossed the Humber river and was put up for the night by Allan Wilcox.

The next day saw Mackenzie and Wilcox cross the Credit River, making it to the mill of William Comfort, an old friend who had not heard about the rebellion. He fed Mackenzie, gave him a wagon and guarded his flank as he travelled to 16 Mile Creek.

Raible said they were spotted by a band of militia. Wilcox abandoned the wagon and they hid in the woods, with dogs searching for them. They decided to cross the creek, which Raible said was a significant task in 1837 and at night. Wilcox and Mackenzie took off their clothes and held them above the water as they made their way across.

They eventually made it to the home of Wilcox's uncle, named Smith.

Both men were exhausted, especially Mackenzie, who had spent the previous several days trying to rally troops for the rebellion. But he had to keep moving.

Saturday morning, he got to the farm of David Ghent north of Hamilton, and he let him hide there.

There was a sheriff in the area looking for Mackenzie without success.

Ghent provided the fugitive with some hot water and slippers, since his feet were too swollen to wear shoes.

Mackenzie proceeded to the home of Charles King, then made his way to Dundas and the home of James Lafferty, who lent him a horse. Although he was known in the area, Mackenzie wasn't stopped, but Raible said the going was still hard. Mackenzie had to ride up and down the Niagara Escarpment three times.

He was able to arrive at the home of Jacob Rymal, who provided him with another horse before sending him on his way.

The Saturday night was the only time on the journey, Raible said, that Mackenzie got lost, as he was well away from any of the main roads.

Mackenzie came to the farm of William McWatters as the sun was coming up Sunday morning. He asked for breakfast, food for the horse, and directions to the main road. McWatters responded he was going to take Mackenzie to Hamilton and have him arrested.

Raible figured that Mackenzie was dishevelled, but was riding on a fine horse, so he concluded he was dealing with a horse thief.

Mackenzie had a loaded pistol on him, but elected to try and talk his way out of the situation, telling McWatters about the rebellion and the problems faced by farmers.

"It turned out McWatters had very little sympathy for the government," Raible observed.

Mackenzie also showed him his belt buckle, which bore his initials. His initials were also embroidered on his underwear, and he showed that to McWatters too.

That Sunday saw Mackenzie travel to Smithville, where he was spotted and chased. He was able to hide his horse in a shed and make his way to the home of Thomas Hardy. Hardy wasn't home, but his wife was. He slept there for about four hours, then left and found Samuel Chandler, who knew of Mackenzie and admired him. Chandler agreed to travel with him Sunday night, eventually arriving at the farm of Samuel McAfee, an old friend.

It was he and Chandler who helped Mackenzie get across the Niagara River. This was in December, with the river flowing hard and full of ice, but he was able to get across to Grand island, and then to Buffalo Monday night.

It was there where he started talking with people who were sympathetic to the idea of Canadian independence.

Raible called his journey a tale of endurance, of confidence in people and government ineptness, "and maybe just plain luck."

"He remains today one of the more controversial figures in Canadian history," he added.



Author and historian Chris Raible used this map to outline the route William Lyon Mackenzie used to escape to Buffalo after the failed 1837 Rebellion.