

Incredible athlete watched Chatham emerge from wilderness

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Special/Chatham This Week

Athletic endeavour was not a subject that generated much media interest in 19th-century Chatham. Life was hard and non-essential matters were, for the most part, ignored.

There was, however, one amazing athlete who, albeit belatedly, had his story revealed in the Chatham Daily News issue of Nov. 15, 1927.

His name was Peter Miller Jr.

Miller was born at Chatham on Nov. 11, 1836, and during his lifetime lived under the sovereign reign of four monarchs: George IV, Victoria, Edward VII and George V. He was exceedingly proud of that fact, even though he was Irish Catholic and his parents were both of American birth.

His father, also named Peter, was a veteran of the War of 1812, and was wounded while serving under General Isaac Brock at Queenston Heights.

Peter Miller Sr. was born in Philadelphia in 1795, and his wife, in New York City, in 1800. Both came to Canada when young. The elder Miller was living at what is now Waterloo when the War of 1812 broke out, and subsequently enlisted for service with the British forces. After the war he married and later relocated to Chatham.

In the interview, his son recalled seeing the first team of horses to come to the Chatham district, which were owned by his uncle, Sam Brundage. The horses were expensive, having cost Brundage 200 acres of his 500-acre farm. In that era, farms were still worked with oxen, as horses were beyond the reach of most pioneers.

Peter Miller Jr. had vivid recollections of early Chatham, particularly the area of what is now Queen Street, between Lorne Avenue and Harvey Street. In the mid-point of the 19th century this area contained an immense hop yard. The hops were used in the brewing of beer by Henry Slagg (Slagg's Chatham Brewery). Mr. Slagg owned most of the property in the area and devoted it to the production of hops, the vines for which trailed from 16 foot poles and in the fall he employed numerous women and children to harvest the crop.

Miller was an amazing athlete, capable of running the 100-yard dash in just over nine seconds and could achieve more than 24 feet in the long jump and 48 feet in the hop-step-and jump. He was good enough that he could pursue his skills in the U.S. and did so, as far

south as Mississippi, from the age of 19 to 24.

During the interview, Miller recalled that Thomas Stone was a prominent dry goods merchant and could remember when this store was founded in the mid-1850s. And he had the following to say of the enterprise.

"I remember when this business establishment was founded by the late Thomas Stone, father of the present Spencer Stone who is president of the company. For a good many years, members of my family bought all their dry goods from this store, and the first overcoat, which I ever purchased myself, was bought from Mr. Stone Sr., founder of the store when the latter was a clerk in a store run by his uncle, Mr. Burns, just across from where the post office (southwest corner King and 4th streets) now stands."

The Stone store eventually evolved to become Walker's Department Store and would



Spencer Stone

survive into the latter 1970s.

Peter was particularly fond of the fact that he was born on a farm very close to what

is now the Via Rail Station and had the opportunity to see that area progress from wilderness to a developed and populated area during his lifetime.

In the latter years of his life, Peter lived at 46 Harvey St., where he resided with his daughter Jennie Deselle, and among his friends was Henry Smyth who was a four-time Mayor of Chatham and former MP for the riding of West Kent. Another of his comrades was the remarkable Tecumseh Kingsley Holmes, a well-known and honoured physician of the 19th century.

Peter Miller died at Chatham on Jan. 24, 1931 and rests in St. Anthony Cemetery.

The above is only a portion of the extensive interview. It might be worth your time to go to the Library and read the remainder of it.

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