A WILDERNESS BOYHOOD: THE LAKE MEGANTIC MEMORIES OF JAMES S. RAMAGE, 1868–82

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Introduction

Aside from the fact that Robert Walters of Sherbrooke deposited a photocopy of the following text with the Eastern Townships Research Centre in November 1994, the provenance of the brief memoir recounting James Ramage's boyhood on the shores of Lake Megantic is unknown.[1] Nor can we be certain that the document is complete, since it ends abruptly at the bottom of page fourteen, but internal evidence suggests that it is. Ramage's story ends in 1882, when he is fourteen years old and about to accompany his family to the mid-western United States for what would probably be a more secure and less exciting life. This memoir was written when Ramage was already in his mid-fifties; he mentions in the text that he remembers driving through Washington's Spokane Valley forty years later. Despite this, Ramage's memory of his boyhood years remained fresh, for this is a lively unpolished account of life on what he calls a stump farm, the nearest town accessible only by boat during the summer and ice road in winter. Ramage's family led a hand-to-mouth existence during these years, but his parents were well-educated and he was exposed to a rich cultural environment at home while also becoming skilled at wilderness survival. Since at least as early as the 1830s, the picturesque landscape of the Eastern Townships had attracted people imbued with romantic notions of life close to nature.[2] Most did not persist for very long, but the Ramages were an exception largely because they had little choice[3], though James remembered the experience fondly because of the strong family and community bonds it produced, as well as the adventures he experienced as a rather reckless youth.

According to a hand-written addition to Ramage's memoir, his father, James Douglas Ramage, was born in Prescott, Upper Canada

in 1831, and his mother, Helen Miranna Savage, was born in Belleville in 1836. James, Senior was a rather irresponsible wanderer who left his young family, and his position as a watchmaker and silversmith with Tiffany's in New York in order to prospect for gold in Colorado. After returning penniless seven years later, he took advantage of his eastern connections and western experience to acquire a position with New York's Reciprocity Mining Company which in 1865 had purchased land in the Whitton and Marston townships, on the northern and western shores of Lake Megantic.[4] The company's venture was not profitable and its lots had reverted to the crown by 1872. At this time, the unemployed Ramage acquired a wilderness lot, presumably on the north shore of Lake Megantic's Victoria Bay, for on the topographical map accompanying the memoir the words "Ramage Point" have been added by hand to this spot. While there is no reference to it in the memoir, the oldest son, John (known as Jack), had a gold mining claim across the bay on range II, lot 19. He would sign a mortgage on this lot for $300 in 1881[5], the year before he and the rest of the family moved to Minnesota where his wife owned land.

While the first half of the nineteenth century in eastern British North America is associated with settlement and the establishment of a rural economy, and the second half with urbanization, industrialization, and the market integration of farm production, the French-Canadian rural exodus to New England spurred a nationalist campaign to colonize marginal land beyond the old seigneurial zone, such as in the Upper St. Francis watershed and the adjoining Lake Megantic area at the head of the Chaudière River.[6] Also attracted by the free grants and government-funded colonization roads built during the late 1840s and early 1850s were Gaelic-speaking Scots from the remote Isle of Lewis in the Outer Hebrides, which had been struck by a severe potato famine.[7] The Ramage family arrived on the scene just as the Scots settlement frontier reached the northern shore of Lake Megantic[8], and James was born just as Confederation strengthened the French-Canadian nationalists' desire to stem the growing tide of migration to New England while vesting ownership of the crown lands with the provincial level of government. The result was a second wave of colonization programmes focused largely on the Lake Megantic area, causing conflict between the Scots and French-Canadian settlers. Violence was only averted by the intervention of government land agents and the withdrawal of the Highlanders from South Marston, site of the so-called papal Zouave colony of Piopolis.[9] As Ramage's memoir

Photograph of Lake Megantic showing the corner of a jetty and probably Mont Megantic in the distance across the lake. Source: Lake Megantic [GM] / by Morkill, [194?], P998 ETRC Graphic Material Collection.

reveals, however, young Scots and French Canadians still battled each other in the town of Lake Megantic which sprang up with the arrival of the International Railway in 1879.[10]

Most of these men worked in the woods during the winter, cutting the logs that were floated down the Chaudière River to the St. Lawrence before the arrival of the railway, and to the sawmills of Lake Megantic thereafter. The soil was too thin and the growing season too short in this mountainous region for families to rely solely on agriculture, and James Ramage, Senior – known as Major Ramage – was no farmer in any case.[11] His family suffered considerable hardships, though the situation improved briefly in 1880 when he acquired a position as local superintendent of the Dominion of Canada Land and Trust Company, one of several European-financed ventures formed to fund settlement in the area from some of the profits earned by cutting and milling timber. None of these companies proved to be financially successful, though they did inject a considerable amount of capital into the region while weakening the stranglehold of the timber monopolies.[12] Unfortunately, the increasingly alcoholic James Ramage, Senior lost both his feet to frost-bite the first year he was employed by the Dominion Land Company, forcing his family to become more reliant than ever on the resourcefulness of the eldest son, Jack, who also worked for the

company. But the young James, Junior and his slightly older brother, Will, also contributed by doing much of the farm labour even before they were ten years of age, though they did manage to attend school on an intermittent basis. After their beloved mother died in 1881, James's younger sister, Blanche, and his adopted cousin, Mattie, became responsible for the household.

What follows, then, is an intimate glimpse at life on what was effectively the last frontier in southern Quebec. This was a romantic place insofar as it represented resistance to proletarianization and assimilation for the uprooted Highland families who would not have been able to settle as a group and sustain their language and culture in a more agriculturally viable area, and for the French-Canadian colonists who had been convinced by urban-based nationalist societies that life here would be better than in the mill towns of New England. And more romantic still were the dreamers and misfits attracted by the false lure of gold and inexhaustible game, including the English remittance men referred to in Ramage's memoir, as well as his own father. The moment was fleeting, however, for the railway that carried the Ramage family westward in 1882 was doing the same for the Scots, whose population had already reached its peak, while French Canadians eagerly took the jobs offered in the mills of the rapidly growing town of Lake Megantic. The lakes and forests remained, but by 1887 access to the most productive fishing and hunting areas would be restricted to wealthy club members from Boston and New York.[13]

Document[14]

I was born December 17, 1868 in the then semi-wild country of Lower Canada about sixty miles from the City of Quebec and on the shores of beautiful Lake Megantic…sixty miles from the nearest rail head[15] and with a twice-weekly mail service by horse stage. We were about eight miles from the Maine (U.S.A.) border but that part of Maine was then entirely unsettled except for trappers and occasional hunting and fishing parties.

The rugged terrain kept the lake shores almost entirely unsettled as to farming, such farming as there was being a mile or two back.

One side of the lake was settled by Highland Scotch, speaking almost entirely Gaelic. The other side settled by French Canadians,

with a clean-cut dividing line between the two. No Scotch or English man would settle among the French and vice versa.[16]

Later, when the railroad came through, the village of Agnes was formed at the foot of the lake with the Chaudiere River, a famous trout stream, dividing it but that was where the two factions came together with many a bloody fight and some fatal casualties.[17]

I mention this to give you an idea of the general situation and its bearing on the few years to follow.

My father, James Douglas Ramage, a watchmaker and silversmith by trade, employed at Tiffany's in New York City, got the western mining fever and he and a brother set out in a wagon train to cross the plains to Colorado, where he remained for seven years and came home penniless. He had left Mother and the two older children, John and Katie, behind at Kingston, Ontario, during the seven years. This accounts for the wide spread in ages of we children. Four more – two boys (of which I was one) and two girls were born in the next twelve years.

Father and his brother built the first log cabin on the site of the present city of Denver. We had the picture of it in the house for many years but it has been lost, much to the family's regret. When he returned from Colorado he was tendered the position of mine manager for a gold property on Lake Megantic. The mining company built him a good house on the only main road then going through, and there I was born.

After a few years the mine proved worthless and he was left without a job and without means of any kind. I was then about four years old.

He and my older brother with the help of his family acquired a tract of land up the lake, not accessible by road, and there built a comfortable log house and commenced to hew out a stump farm; but Father was out of employment and the barest necessities of life came hard. Father set up his workbench and resumed his trade of watch repairing, et cetera, but in that sparsely settled and frugal country, a few dollars a month were all he could expect. I recall one bitter winter when we lived on frozen potatoes (the cellar would not keep out the frost in the fifty to fifty-five degree below zero weather) and barley bread, no milk, butter, sugar, and only an occasional small piece of salt pork.

Mother's birthday came on and my older sister broke the empty maple syrup bottles and boiled out the bottoms to get a little sweetening for her cup of tea. This formed her birthday celebration. Spring came on and we began to live on the fat of the land. A fresh cow or two providing milk and butter, hens began to lay, Will and I were getting old enough to fish and got plenty of trout and whitefish. Wildberries were thick and the vegetable garden was a life saver, so we lived well in the summer and fall, only to go through the same experience in the winter, but never so bad as that one year.

We were utterly improvident, for instance in looking back I can see where for years while we carried water in pails one hundred and fifty yards uphill, we could have, in two or three days work, had a good well right along side of the kitchen. We could have had a cow come fresh in the fall, but it apparently never occurred to us. Our winter's wood could have been cut in the summer but never was. In those early days game was plentiful, moose and deer within fifteen miles of us, and a supply could have been frozen, fish could have been salted down. The answer was that both father and mother were citybred and in spite of father's mining experience, he had no idea of how to provide.

This situation was aggravated by father's drinking habits, which were eventually his ruin. He was visionary in the extreme and was always going to make a fortune; consequently, had no time nor inclination for the mundane things of life…a wonderfully talented man with a good education, a magnificent singing voice, played several musical instruments, and was "Hail fellow, well met!" in any company. Our home was headquarters for the young English remittance men and younger sons, of which there were many charming fellows it seemed to me, so we had much company in the summer but were rather isolated in the winter. Our only means of egress was by boat or over ice in winter, or a rough foot trail through the forest.

Our early education was at home. We had a good library and read and have had read to us such authors as Scott, Dickens, McCauley, Thackeray, Shakespeare, Spenser, and many other standard authors, with the result that when a few years later my sister, Blanche, and I went to school in Minnesota, we were, while deficient in some studies, so much better read than our teacher that it was sometimes

embarrassing. Still our early teaching and reading at home has always been most valuable.

My brother, Will, and I commenced work on the farm when we were about six and seven years old, hauling wood all winter on a hand sled and doing chores. In spite of these hard years there was much fun and many good times in the family —- nearly always singing and reading aloud in the long winter evenings.

Many funny occurrences took place. We had a snow barrel in the kitchen kept full all winter to melt and save carrying water from the lake for washing, et cetera. Will and I were cutting chunks of packed snow to fill the barrel and while I was stooping, Will came down with a blunt axe on my fat little behind. Will looked at the results and said, "the roe is coming out." (We had cleaned many fish full of roe, and I suppose the fat resembled it.) I rushed into the house with my pants down, bawling, "Mother, the roe is coming out, the roe is coming out." Needless to say, I sat on a cushion, on one side, for many days. I still have the scar.

So we grew, crossing the lake in all kinds of weather, traveling on the ice in winter, and when it was getting rotten in the spring, carrying a light cedar pole, holding it crossways to pull our selves out if we broke through. We grew strong and completely at home in woods and waters, and it has never been forgotten. I often think now of what Mother must have suffered. She was desperately afraid of water and when Will and I crossed the lake a distance of four miles, alone in a boat, the first time she came down the shore to see us off – we left her crying. It seemed foolish to us, but I knew later that she was in misery until we returned.

About this time a school was organized three and a half miles from our home and we started in walking the trail through the woods in the morning, and home at night, during the summer. No winter session could be held, getting back and forth was impossible in winter. The teacher was a little, bad-tempered Scotsman, a firm believer in the "Spare the rod and spoil the child" theory. To add to our discomfort, father had told us that every time we got a licking at school he would give us another at home. My dream then was to sometime get big enough to lick the daylights out of that evil-minded little rat of a teacher, but he left the school and I never got my revenge. We had to get up at five in the morning, get our chores done and off to school at seven-thirty, reaching home at about five-thirty in the evening —- then to milking and other chores until

about eight P.M. It made a long day for two small boys, but never hurt us a bit. We went to this school for two summers and I well remember the closing of school in the autumn of the last year. The school directors, the teacher, and Father, all seated on the platform and under the influence of liquor, listened to a sort of examination, then told us we had been good children and to come forward and get our prizes; these consisted of apples cut in eight pieces – just one bite for each scholar.

One experience stands out that last summer. Will was taken with terrible stomach cramps on the way home and could hardly walk. We would lie by the side of the road, then I would carry him "Pig-a-back" for one or two hundred yards, then he would walk a little, but have to give up again, and I would carry him. In this manner we finally walked home, both about all in.

A company of militia was formed with father as Major and Jack, the older brother, as Lieutenant, and later Captain. The armory was in our home and we younger children, Will, sister Blanche, (a year and a half younger than I) and I paraded with bayonets, canteens and occasionally rifles, when the older ones were away and we could sneak them out of the house.

The country was settling up. An English colonization syndicate bought a large tract of land and Father and Jack got good positions with them and our extremely hard-up times were much relieved.

Father and Jack had to attend the annual militia encampment and drill at Sherbrooke, about sixty miles from home. Will and I were to go along and stay with friends, but we had no clothes, except those homemade and cut down from cast off garments sent by Father's family in Montreal. We took our one horse and each worked a week for the land company, for which we received $4.50 each. This bought us two blue serge suits, exactly alike, and we felt very much grown up.

We saw our first circus (Adam Forepaughs) and earned a little candy money by picking ground hemlock for the officers' tent beds.

We went swimming in the St. Francis river, a rather broad and swift stream, and crossed it to be near the soldiers holding target practice. After playing around in the sun for some time we, with three other boys, started back and when near the middle, Will, without any warning, threw up his hands and started to sink. Ned Farwell and I got hold of him, one on each side and started back. It was a desper-

ate struggle at first but he soon became unconscious and we finally dragged him ashore. Some of the officers heard the other boys screaming and came down to the bank and administered first aid, but it was a full half-hour before he showed any signs of life.

Ned Farwell was the son of the manager of the Sherbrooke branch of the Bank of Montreal and I learned in later years that Ned became very prominent in Canadian financial circles. But for his help, Will would, I fear, have been drowned. The other two boys were hysterical with fear.

We went along for a year or two, until Will and I were in our tenth and eleventh years, Will being the elder. In the meantime, my younger sister, Laeta was born. She arrived in the dead of winter, with no doctor in attendance. He came a day late, his twenty-mile drive in the terrible blizzard forcing him to find shelter at a farmhouse until the roads could be broken out. The same storm caught Father and Jack and they too came in two days late. Mother was attended by old Granny McLeod, who could speak not one word of English, but who had been midwife for all of us children born at the lake.[18]

We were in the midst of a raging storm, the mercury at about forty-five degrees below zero, the roads impassable, Granny unable to talk except by signs. My older sister, Katie, then an invalid, our adopted sister, Mattie, (a cousin) about sixteen years of age, we two boys, not yet in our teens, and one can imagine the dread with which Mother must have approached her ordeal —- still everything went along all right.

I was shocked at seeing Granny sitting by the stove holding the day-old baby, putting a spoon full of cow's milk in her own mouth, holding it until it had reached the proper stage of warmth and dilution, then from her mouth putting it back in the spoon and feeding the baby, and not the slightest sign of infection or trouble of any kind following. Mother was able to nurse the baby by the following day.

Two years after Laeta was born, when I was still in my eleventh year, Father was looking over a new tract of land for the colonization company. It was in a dense, unsettled forest area, and in crossing a river, he broke through the ice and got his matches wet. He became confused and was lost for five days without food or matches, finally reaching a logging camp on the Maine side of the line,

both feet frozen so they had to be amputated, first just back of the toes and later at the high instep, leaving just the heels. He was in bed at home for nearly a year. His feet, owing possibly to his constant drinking habits, would not heal. The doctors decided that my skin was most suitable for grafting and over a period of months my arms and legs were continually sore from grafts being snipped out. They finally caught and his feet healed.

A little over a year later, Mother, at the age of forty-five, and always seemingly healthy and in good spirits, contracted a cold which went into pneumonia and she died in three days.

I thought the world had come to an end for me. Mother was always the head of the family and completely idolized by us all. A high-spirited, lovely woman, she attracted people in the whole area. The young English remittance men came to her as though she were their own mother. A good medicine cabinet in the family made her, in the absence of a doctor, the idol and last resort of the Highland Scotch settlement in case of sickness and accident. They almost worshipped her and would come and help in times of stress, both men and women, with never thought of pay.

One would have thought that Mother, after what she had passed through, would have been a discouraged and disappointed woman, but she never showed it. Of high morale, an unfailing sense of humor, and better than all, blessed with courage and never ending good spirits; always in her family she was a true pioneer, coming from a comparatively prosperous and cultured, well educated family to the extreme wilds of Lower Canada, and through trial and hardship, making a home for her family.

Two months later, my sister, Katie, now a confirmed invalid and completely dependent upon Mother, passed away quietly. They were both buried on the farm on a hillside facing the lake…a spot they loved.

Father was still confined to the house and Jack now had for nearly two years been the sole financial support of the family except for such farm produce as Will and I, with occasional help and guidance from Jack, were able to provide. This supplied our vegetables, meat, milk and butter, eggs and poultry, and, for a time, flour. A grist mill had in the meantime been built by one of our Scotch neighbors, so it was a very considerable help toward a comfortable living.

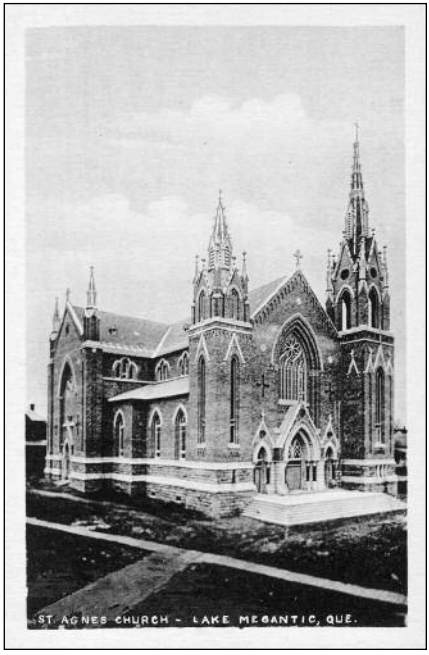
Jack was now the head of the family with Mattie, about twenty, assisted by Blanche, who was a year and four months younger than I, as housekeeper.

Father had set up his bench again in the village of Agnes, but his old cronies soon started him drinking and for a time he just eked out a bare living for himself.

The following fall, Jack married Ella Morrill, whom we all knew and loved.

Before Mother's death she had succeeded in getting a promise from friends in the Bank of Toronto that Will could go in as messenger in the Montreal branch when he was fourteen. He left that year and stayed with them in various capacities until he was thirty.

The September before Mother died we went to church at Agnes on Sunday afternoon, a beautiful day, but on starting home after dark, a very hard wind was blowing the full length of the twelve mile lake. Jack and I were rowing with Mother and the minister sitting in the rear end. Jack and I though little of it but Mother was desperately frightened. Mr. McArthur, the minister, repeated to her the Ninety-First Psalm, and it has been a favorite of mine ever since. We reached home safely, but a half-hour later a man staggered up to the door crying that the boat behind us had upset and all but he were drowned. No sign of the boat or any of the other five occupants could be located that night. The next morning we found the body of one girl on the beach beneath the overhanging yellow top of a white birch tree. The other bodies were recovered by dragging during the next two days. The girl had fainted from fright before the boat upset. This accounted for her floating, she evidently never regained consciousness and died of exposure in the cold water.



Source: ETRC postcard collection series
Lac Megantic Fonds P999-022

One of the girls who drowned was Flora McDonald, a very sweet Scotch girl, who had at one time worked for Mother, so it brought the tragedy pretty close to our family.

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To go back a year or two, our cattle ranged almost entirely in the woods in the summer time and it was often a job to bring them in for the milking. One night the lead cow broke from the trail and started down a steep hill. I grabbed her by the tail and as we passed a small maple tree swung around it and hung on; there was a crack and a bellow and the lower half of the tail came off, just hanging by a small piece of skin. Father noticed she couldn't swing it properly and gave it a pull, so it came off in his hand. She grew a big lump on the end of it, just in the right place to catch one on the ear when milking. When she chose to use it, it was like being whacked on the ear with a baseball bat. Her name was Rosie, but we changed it to Nobby.

Another time I had fitted a bayonet on a broom handle and kept it in a hollow log on the edge of the woods, carrying it with me when going after the cows. When the same cow broke trail, I threw it at her and hit her above the hook head-on. It went through the thin part of the leg, leaving, when pulled out, a three-cornered hole and making her pretty lame. Father asked what had happened. I said she must have snagged herself. He said it was a funny-shaped hole for a snag, but he never caught on. (I got rid of the "bayonet" quick.)

We had a steer I did not like and putting a halter on him I threw the rope over a beam in the barn, pulled his head up until he was helpless, and poured nearly a full bottle of painkiller down his throat. He went crazy, running around in a circle and dragging his mouth on the ground. He would not let me near him for a month.

Will and I in the winter snared hare (corresponding to our snow-shoe rabbits) with copper wire, and Jack paid us 10 cents each for them until we got too many, when he had to shut us off. A country storekeeper three and a half miles from our place sent word that he could use some. I took three of them one cold winter day, only to find out he would only take one, for which he paid me 10 cents. I would not throw the other two away, and lugged them back home. That ended the rabbit business for the winter.

The following summer the hotel saloon keeper at Agnes wanted something from our end of the lake and sent word that he would

pay me for bringing it. Father and Jack had both boats so I took our old mare and rode bareback nine miles there and nine back. He paid me 25¢ when I expected a dollar. I was completely disgusted and bought a half-pound of vile candy which I ate on the way home. It made me sick. I arrived home late in the evening of a very hot day. The old mare's backbone was pretty sharp and I had a badly skinned place in a very tender spot. Not a profitable day, and again, for a week I had to sit on a cushion.

Sir John A. MacDonald, the Premier of Canada, and Lady Agnes MacDonald, visited the lake and stayed with us overnight. Will and I took Lady Agnes boat riding, walking, et cetera, and when she left, she presented with much ceremony each of us with ten cents, so our ideas of finance were still not exaggerated!

There was an Englishman named Steer whom everyone disliked—a disagreeable, quarrelsome snob. Also, a young American civil engineer named Pierce whom everyone liked. These two had an altercation and agreed to settle it with bare knuckles. Pierce asked Jack to act as his second and a fellow named McMillan was Steer's second. They went to a secluded spot outside of town and Steer, though the lighter and smaller of the two, was a trained boxer and gave Pierce an awful drubbing. Forty years later in driving through the Spokane Valley I had a flat tire and stopped in front of a nice home to change. An elderly lady came out and on learning my name was Ramage, said her brother, an engineer named Pierce, was a great friend of some Ramages at Lake Megantic and that a John Ramage was his second when he administered a sound thrashing to a very objectionable Englishman. I replied, "Yes, and the Englishman's name was Steer."

We had a nice visit but I did not tell the lady that she had the wrong report on the fight.

These little happenings are mentioned to provided a clearer idea of the conditions under which we grew up.

The next winter, Blanche and I went to school at Agnes, walking across the ice three and a half miles morning and night.

The winter I was about thirteen, two men that we knew came out from Boston to hunt deer in the winter and took me with them. We had two French half-breed guides who had a log cabin and trap line just across the Maine border where we made our headquarters. This was a memorable trip for me. The only means for cooking was a

huge, homemade stone fireplace. I can still see this four-gallon black iron kettle hanging on a swing bar in the fireplace, half full of venison, simmering all the time. Native pheasants were everywhere and pulling the skin and feathers off, were dressed and thrown into the pot whole. To this were added from time to time potatoes and onions, the only vegetables we had, and it made a savory stew. This, with Dutch oven hot bread and a few jars of Crosse & Blackwell jam, made our diet. One could fish out with a long handle ladle, a pheasant or a piece of venison and potatoes and sometimes dumplings, and it was to my boy's taste, a dish for a King.

The method of hunting was to find where the deer were yarding up on the mountain side, crisscrossing the area with paths so they could feed off the brush, then turning three small dogs loose to drive the deer out in the deep snow where we could soon run them down on snowshoes—a murderous way of hunting but there was no law and we wanted meat, though avoiding unnecessary slaughter. The second day we were in camp the two guides, the two Boston men, and myself went out after meat. The dogs soon started yipping and the chase was on. Being brought up on snowshoes I could completely outrun the other two (the guides staying with them.) I soon caught up with a big buck and two does wallowing through the five foot snow single file, the buck in the lead. I had an old hand loading cap and ball six shooter revolver, or as we called it in those days, a horse pistol. Running up along side I shot all three down through the back. Taking one of my snowshoes off I dug a hole down to the ground and dumping the carcasses in, filled the snow in over them and piled brush on top. The others, being out of it, had gone back to camp. I got back to camp about an hour after dark. When told the story, the guides were tickled stiff, but the Boston gents did no seem to appreciate it very much. After getting something to eat one of the guides took a lantern and toboggan and together we went back and brought in the carcasses.

We caught trout through the ice whenever we wanted them, and for me, it was a great experience.

The year following, we had sold some timber off the place and I went away to school for about four months, having to go home March 1st as Jack, who had been at home, had to go back to his work with the land company.

The maple sugar on which we depended had to be made. We had on the farm a sugar bush of two hundred and thirty trees about a

mile from home. I dug the camp out of four feet of snow, tapped the trees, put out the sap buckets, cut the wood to run the boiling pans, et cetera, carried the sap with an old-fashioned neck yoke. Jack got home a day now and then to help me. This was really the hardest work I ever did, but I made several tubs of sugar and many gallons of syrup. I was then in my fourteenth year.

Jack and I were both expert axe men, slashing a few acres every winter, burning the brush when dry in the spring, then piling and burning the logs, thus adding a few acres each year to the tillable land. The year before, I was working at this slashing alone, when in over confidence I put the axe right through my left foot, cutting the main artery clean in two. The blood spurted at first four or five feet with each heartbeat and being a fourth of a mile from home in deep snow, I was scared and dropping the axe, started to run, but soon fainted, from loss of blood; falling in the snow would revive me and I finally staggered in and fell against the kitchen door clean out. They put a tourniquet on my leg but I was bled dry by this time and for the next several hours had a series of fainting spells. In thirty days I was as good as ever, and being confined to the house, had a mighty good rest. This incident is related to illustrate the recuperative powers incidental to the hardy life we lived in those pioneer days.

The following year, Ella, Jack's wife, owning a half-section of land in Minnesota, Jack planned on moving the family West. The big lumber companies, of which there were now several, had previously sponsored a rather extensive annual regatta—sculling, paddling and sailing races being held which attracted crowds from a distance. The main event was eight oarsmen and a stern and bow paddler in each boat, fashioned after the river driving boats, but no money spared in the construction and manned by crews from the different companies. Some of the crews were French Canadians and others Scotch and English, and the rivalry was intense and bitter, to the extent that sometimes blood was shed. Large sums of money, for those days, were wagered. The races were started from the outer end of a long pier jutting into the lake five or six hundred feet. The sailing races following a triangular course, the rowing races a straight away, turning a buoy and returning to finish in front of the Judges' stand on the outer end of the pier.

Jack had won the men's single scull. I had won the boy's single and Jack and I pulling together won the men's double. When we

climbed up on the pier, a Frenchman hit Jack on top of the head with a maple paddle knocking him flat. Instantly Jack was surrounded by our friends to keep the French from jumping on him with their calk boots and the fight was on. It was a bloody affair. Jack regained his feet right away and with a solid wall of our friends marched down the pier throwing the mob back or into the lake until the women and younger children were loaded on the steamer and attached barge. We then backed up and made a run for the steamer and other boats, followed by a mob of screaming French. It was lucky for our side that the pier was comparatively narrow, for being on the French side of the lake, we were outnumbered three to one. The English remittance men were right in their glory in a scrap of this kind.

NOTES

1 The call number is P997. I was unable to learn anything about Mr Walters, or to find his number in the phone book.

2 See J.I. Little, ed., *Love Strong as Death: Lucy Peel's Canadian Journal, 1833–1836* (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2001); "The Naturalist's Landscape: Philip Henry Gosse in the Eastern Townships, 1835–38," *Journal of Eastern Townships Studies*, no. 20 (2002): 59–74; and "Canadian Pastoral: Promotional Images of British Colonization in the Eastern Townships of Lower Canada during the 1830s," *Journal of Historical Geography*, 29 (2003): 189–211.

3 For a rich account of the experiences of another settler family in a similar situation, again largely due to the fecklessness of the father, see Jane Vansittart, ed., *Lifelines: The Stacey Letters, 1836–1858* (London: Peter Davies, 1976).

4 The memoir does not mention the company's name, but it was the only one in the area to move beyond the speculative stage at this time. See J.I. Little, *Nationalism, Capitalism, and Colonization in Nineteenth-Century Quebec: The Upper St Francis Distric*t (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1989), 131–2, 256, n. 14.

5 Cookshire Registry Office, registry B, vol. 10, pp. 715–16, no. 5951, obligation and mortgage, John Ramage, Marston farmer, to Lt. Col. Charles King, Sherbrooke.

6 See Little, *Nationalism, Capitalism, and Colonization*, chapters 1 and 4.

7 See J.I. Little, *Crofters and Habitants: Settler Society, Economy, and Culture in a Quebec Township, 1848–1881* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1991).

8 The first four Scots colonizers settled near the lake in 1852, but they remained cut off from the nearest community for several years. See M.C. MacLeod, *Settlement of the Lake Megantic District in the Province of Quebec, Canada* [New York City: n.p., 1931]; and L.S. Channell, *History of Compton County* (L.S. Channell, 1896; reprinted Belleville, ON: Mika, 1975), 279–80.

9 See Little, *Nationalism, Capitalism, and Colonization*, chapter 6.

10 On the early history of the town, see Jean-Pierre Kesteman, *Histoire de Lac-Mégantic* (Ville de Lac-Mégantic, 1985), chapters 3 and 4.

11 Ramage, whom Kesteman (*Histoire de Lac-Mégantic*, 35) mistakenly assumes was a British officer, is referred to as Major in an unidentified newspaper clipping in J.P. Jones, "History of Lake Megantic, 1760–1921" (unpublished notes and newspaper clipping, National Archives of Canada, MG30 H17), vol. 2, 1881. The memoir states that he was the major of the local militia company, but companies were commanded by captains, not majors, and the county history states that Captain John (not James) Ramage was senior officer when the 58th Battalion's No. 5 Company, Lake Megantic, was established in 1867. Channell, *History of Compton*, 55–6.

12 Ramage is identified as company superintendent in Jones, "History of Lake Megantic," vol. 2, 1881. On the lumber companies and the colonization companies, see Little, *Nationalism, Capitalism, and Colonization*, chapters 5 and 9.

13 Kesteman, *Histoire de Lac Mégantic*, 67–8.

14 Editor's Note: Minor changes in the page set-up and in sentence structure have been made to facilitate the reading of this text. However, as the text written by Ramage is a primary source, most of the text has been left unedited in order to preserve the authenticity of this document,

15 John Henry Pope, Compton County's MP, began plans to build a railway from Lennoxville to Lake Megantic in 1868, but it had only reached the village of Robinson (present-day Bury) by 1875, Scotstown by 1877, and the future town of Lake Megantic by the fall of 1879. In 1885 it would become part of the CPR's Short Line through Maine to St John, New Brunswick. See Little, *Nationalism, Capitalism, and Colonization,* chapter 7.

16 This statement is not accurate, for there were French Canadians as well as Scots settlers on the western side of Lake Megantic, in Marston Township, with the Scots concentrated in the northern half and the French Canadians in the south, which became a separate municipality in 1879. Ditchfield Township on the eastern side of the lake remained largely unsettled. See Little, *Nationalism, Capitalism, and Colonization*, chapter 6.

17 The town received this name after it was visited by Sir John A. Macdonald and his wife, Agnès, in 1879. The part of the town on the Marston side of the Chaudière River came to be known as Megantic until the two municipalities amalgamated as Lake Megantic in 1907. In 1881 ninety-nine of the 120 inhabitants of Megantic, and thirty-four of the sixty inhabitants of Agnes, were French Canadians. The French-speaking ratio would increase rapidly thereafter, as would the population as a whole. See Kesteman, *Histoire de Lac-Mégantic,* 91.

18 On the local Highland midwives, see Margaret Bennett-Knight, "Folkways and Religion of the Hebridean Scots in the Eastern Townships," in Laurel Doucette, ed., *Cultural Retention and Demographic Change: Studies of the Hebridean Scots in the Eastern Townships of Quebec* (Ottawa: National Museums of Canada, 1980), 82–4.