



Newcastle's Joe

By Myno Van Dyke

The Archeological and Historic Sites plaque at the corner of King and Mill Streets in Newcastle says that Joseph E. Atkinson, the former publisher of The Toronto Star, was born in Clarke Township. This came as a bit of a surprise to me as I thought he had only lived in the village. I thought I would try to find out the exact location in Clarke Township and the following Tuesday morning stopped in for my weekly visit with Ken Stephenson at the Historical Society room in Newcastle. "I won't tell you but I will take you there," he told me. It turns out that Ken grew up just a short distance away from this location and went to the nearby Brown's Public School (SS#5). As a young boy, Ken even pitched a tent beside Graham Creek, just a stone's throw from where Joseph E. Atkinson was born.

Joseph (he added the "E" himself) was born in 1865 in a rented house at Lot 20 Concession 2, Clarke Township. His parents were John and Hannah (Storey). The other children were Robert, Hannah, John, William, Thomas, Mary Ann and Earl. Thomas died prematurely just prior to his 16th birthday from complications arising out of an injured shoulder. John Atkinson was employed as a "miller" and worked for some time at the flour mill owned by Francis Squair located at Lot 31, Concession 4 on the banks of Wilmot's Creek.

According to Belden's Atlas, the land and house where the Atkinsons lived was owned by a Dr. Chandler. The house is no longer there but the lilac bushes that grew beside the old home still survive. Looking east from the house you would have seen a small "muley" sawmill powered by the flowing waters of Graham Creek. Today, from that same location, you will see the carefully manicured greens of the Newcastle Golf Course. The house was located on the east side of Golf Course Road about 100 yards north-east of where the creek crosses the roadway.

On June 16, 1866, John Atkinson was walking along the Grand Trunk railway tracks in Newcastle, and being hard of hearing, didn't move for the oncoming train. He was killed leaving his wife along with young Joseph and his seven older brothers, and

sisters in a difficult financial situation. Shortly after, Hannah moved her family into a house at 44 King Street East. Here she opened a boarding house where she took in men who worked at the "Foundry" (this would likely be the Massey Foundry) and the Newcastle Woollen mill. This house still stands today and for the last 37 years has been the residence of Jack and Peggy Pruner. They first rented the home from Clarabell Hare who lived where the CIBC bank is now. Clarabell then offered them the opportunity to purchase it and they did. At that time the house had two apartments. They have done plenty of renovations over the years, adding a family room to the back as well as a pool and new siding.

In 1879, just before Joe's 14th birthday, his mother Hannah died. She is buried at the Bond Head Cemetery along with her husband, John. Joe took a job in the Newcastle Woollen Manufacturing Company, situated at the east end of Toronto Street near the Grand Trunk Railway. His older sister, also named Hannah, kept the boarding house going. In 1880, the Woollen Mill burned down and the previous year, Massey Manufacturing moved out of Newcastle to build a new factory in Toronto. With the village's two major employers closed up it is likely that the Atkinson boarding house business took a big financial hit as well.

Joe found employment at the Newcastle Post Office as a clerk. He was so small he had to stand on a box to serve customers. While working here he noticed an advertisement for a job as a clerk at the Port Hope Times.

In 1887, Atkinson left Port Hope and went to Toronto. Here he worked for "The World" and later "The Globe". He became well known as a talented journalist and eventually moved on to become Publisher of the Toronto Evening Star.

This is where another interesting Newcastle connection shows up. In 1899, while Atkinson was employed at the Montreal Herald, a group of ten businessmen from Toronto approached Joe with a job offer. These ten businessmen had just purchased the Toronto Evening Star for \$32,000. All ten men had a common admiration for Liberal Leader Sir Wilfred Laurier who had

become Prime Minister three years earlier. They felt that the other Toronto daily, The Globe, had far too much "Tory" interest and wanted a more "Liberal" view of the world. This group of ten included Sir William Mulock, Post Master General, cookie and biscuit maker William Christie, department store founder Timothy Eaton, and former Newcastle resident and farm machinery mogul Walter Edward Hart Massey, son of Hart Massey. It was Hart's father Daniel who started Massey Manufacturing in the Village of Newcastle. This company later became Massey Harris and eventually Massey Ferguson. From 1896 until his death in 1901, Walter Massey was president of Massey Harris.

Walter was born in 1864, in Newcastle, just one year before Atkinson. They both attended the Methodist church on Mill Street. Joe Atkinson, who had a fine singing voice, also received payment to sing in the Catholic church before going over to his own church. He received no money for singing at the Methodist

church but was paid as the organ pumper. In later years both the Massey and Atkinson families were very generous to Newcastle. During the famous depression of the "Dirty Thirties", Atkinson sent money to Newcastle to purchase gifts for children of the unemployed. He also started the Star Fresh Air Fund and the Star Santa Claus Fund which still helps out families in distress. Today, the Atkinson Charitable Foundation provides grants for Ontario based projects that focus on improving the futures of youth at risk, finding work for the unemployed and reducing poverty.

Joseph Atkinson often told

a story about how he was sitting beside a pond in Newcastle watching the other children skating when he looked up to see a beautiful lady watching him. "Why aren't you skating with the others?" she asked him. "Because I have no skates," he answered. Taking him by the hand, she took him to a nearby store where she bought him a pair of skates. Then she disappeared. He never saw her again and never found out who she was. It seems clear that the generous lady from Newcastle helped to plant the seeds for one of Canada's great philanthropists.

Written with the grateful assistance of Helen Schmid

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