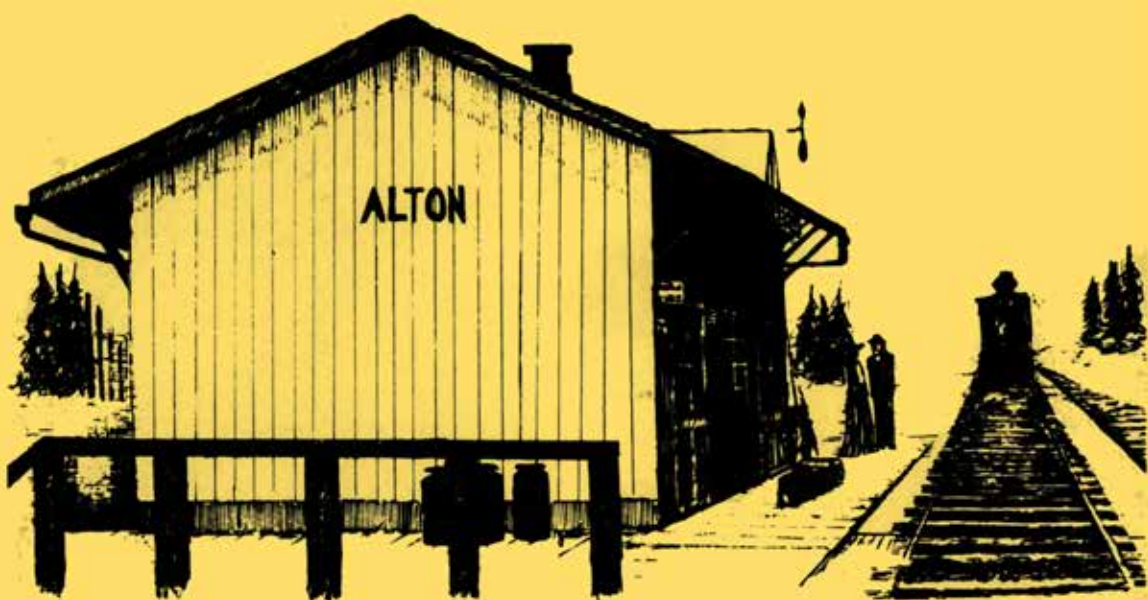


# ALTON

*A Pictorial History*



**RALPH BEAUMONT**



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*by*

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Mastering the crossing of Shaw's Creek on one of its quieter days - 1890 May & Ethel Houston photo

# Acknowledgements

- Tweedsmuir History - Mrs. McClellan and the Alton Women's Institute
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- Rosemary Gossen for the cover sketch

## On the Cover -

1890's scene of a C.P.R. train at Alton Station by Rosemary Gossen

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View of Alton from the Pinnacle - 1890

May & Ethel Houston photo

# *Introduction*

After the success of the “Cataract and the Forks of the Credit” booklet and the establishing of the “Credit Valley Series” by the Boston Mills Press, it became evident that more histories of villages within the valley be published. Alton, the next town north of Cataract on the river, provided fertile territory for the historical researcher. Unlike Cataract, the industry in Alton was much greater and lasted over a longer period of time. Due to this, the quantity of photos and information available concerning Alton’s early days is much more extensive than is usually found in small rural hamlets.

Alton is located in the northern reach of Peel county, just south of Orangeville on Hwy. #136. Shaw’s Creek, which is a tributary of the Credit and whose source is Caledon Lake to the north, runs directly through the town. In the 19th century, water was essential for early industry and was therefore of primary concern in a town’s location. Shaw’s Creek fulfilled these requirements, supplying power to the various mills that lined its banks. Even with its bustling and well recorded past, Alton has met the fate of most rural villages in southern Ontario. It has been transformed from a lively industrial centre to a hamlet of rustic charm, in large part due to the outmoding of water-powered industry and the coming of modern surfaced highways. While the Sunday driver may well be acquainted with Alton’s quiet streets and slower pace. It is hoped that insight will be gained as to its thriving past with the pages of this book.

## *From Forest to a Town*

The first inhabitants in the vicinity of the present village of Alton were the Indians who used the river as a trail from Lake Ontario into the Bruce Peninsula. Behind the Pinnacle (the large hill to the north which dominates the town) can be found the remains of one of their early camps. Due to its height, the site was easy to defend and provided an excellent vantage point from which to spot the herds of Caribou that wandered down the valley. This village was perhaps only a temporary over-night camp as no fortifications are to be found. Even so various artifacts (including flint chips not common to the area) have been unearthed, pointing to its use over an extended period of time, perhaps 3,000 years ago.

The first white settler of the area was Thomas Russel Esq. who arrived in 1834. His family were the only pioneers in what is now the village limits until the arrival of others in 1837. In 1851 Messrs. Shrigley & Farr erected a grist mill, thereby starting the water-powered industry for which Alton would soon be noted. At approximately the same time, Robert Meek opened a store to establish the mercantile aspect of the fledgling town.

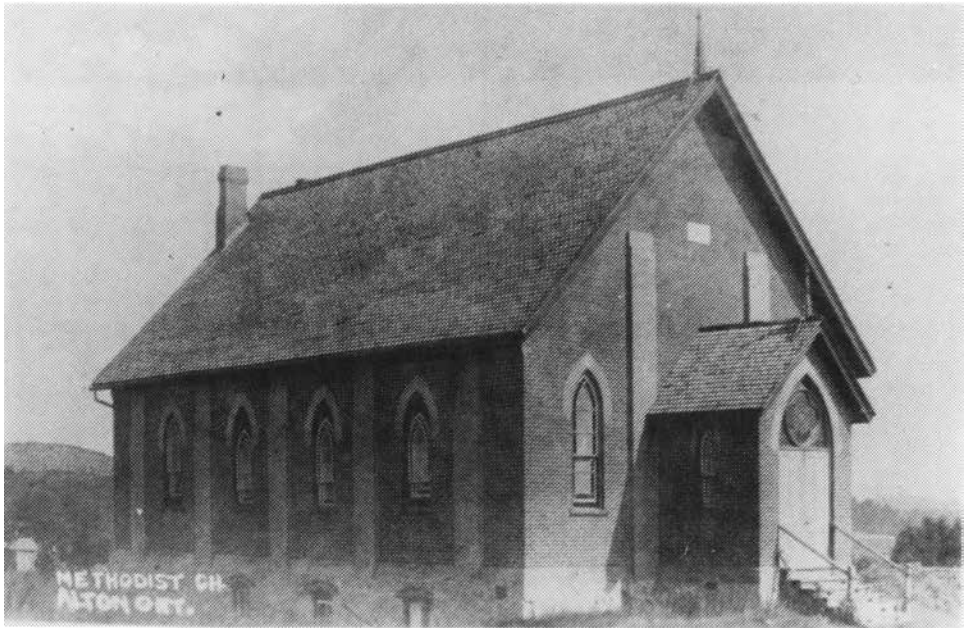
By 1855 the village had grown to the point where incorporation was necessary, as well as the initiating of a post office. To do so however required that the town possess a name. A meeting was called but was adjourned in short order due to conflicting ideas of a suitable title. It seems that each settler wanted the town named after himself and consequently no name could be agreed upon. A meeting was scheduled for the next week with each person being instructed to write his choice on a slip of paper. One name would then be pulled out of a hat and that be used in the town's charter.

John S. Meek who was formerly from the States, had in his possession a newspaper from Alton Illinois. He took this to the meeting Alton was drawn and all agreed that it should be the town's name as it was easy to spell and could be quickly remembered. In turn, Meek was appointed the first postmaster, a position he held until his death.



**Constructing the Alton Baptist Church - 1926** William Thomas photo

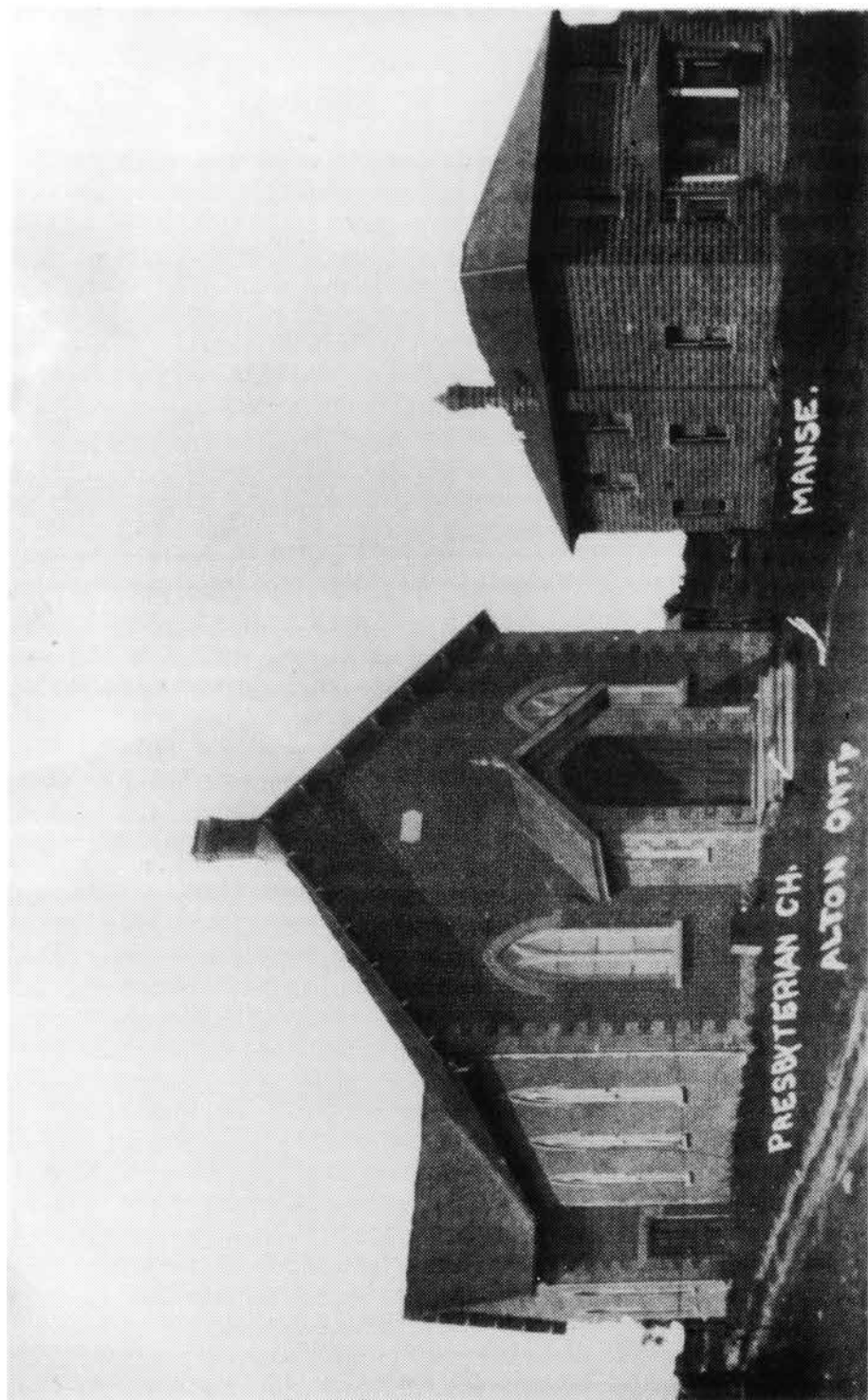




Methodist Church - 1920 Alton Tweedsmuir History photo

No pioneer town was complete without its churches. Alton's first being the Congregational which was founded with the first group of settlers in 1837. They met in private homes until the erection of their fine red brick structure in 1846. The Methodist church was founded in 1850, although they later combined with the Congregationalists. The Congregational Church then sat idle for a period of time during which it was partially burned. It was subsequently renovated in 1918 and is currently in use as the town hall and fire dept. building. The present United church was founded and took over the Methodist building of 1875. A Presbyterian church was erected in 1873 but later folded and was used as a private dwelling. The Baptist church was erected in 1926 and was founded by Rev. G. Brown and evangelist James McKinley. Over 200 loads of stone for the building were drawn from the Thomas farm on 4th line.

Many stores, barbershops, and blacksmiths were founded and died in Alton over the years. Their comings and goings are much too detailed for the contents of this book. The early buildings that are of interest to the historian and best reflected town life, however, were the hotels. The first in the village was established by postmaster Meek in 1850. This building changed hands many times over the years and was eventually burned.



Presbyterian Church - 1920 Alton Tweedsmuir History photo



**The Dixie House (or Palmer House) Hotel - 1910**

Alton Tweedsmuir History photo

The most prominent hotel was the “Dixie House” built by Archie Dick on the corner of Queen and Main Streets in 1870. It was subsequently rebuilt after a fire in March of 1890 and changed hands a number of times before being sold to Mr. J. Palmer in 1918. Re-named “The Palmer House”, it was run successfully for many years by a Miss Charleston who gradually renovated it. It again changed hands many times and although it remains an excellent example of “turn-of-the-century” hotel architecture, is now inoperable.

The third hostelry of Alton was one known, alternately as the Rockview Hotel” or “Rock Inn” and was located to the east of second line adjacent to the old Toronto, Grey and Bruce railway depot. It was a going concern in its day, proprietor Dan Milloy being kept busy supplying rooms to early day railway patrons. Business gradually declined, however, and when the structure accidentally burned it was never rebuilt.

The fourth hotel was a rough cast building on Main Street owned by a Mr. Sanford. It was apparently a very imposing structure with a full length verandah extending across the front and around the sides. It was later rented out as a double residence but eventually burned. Alton’s hotels seemed to possess a propensity for burning, fire being the demise of the fifth hotel, a building run by John Purdy at the west end of town.





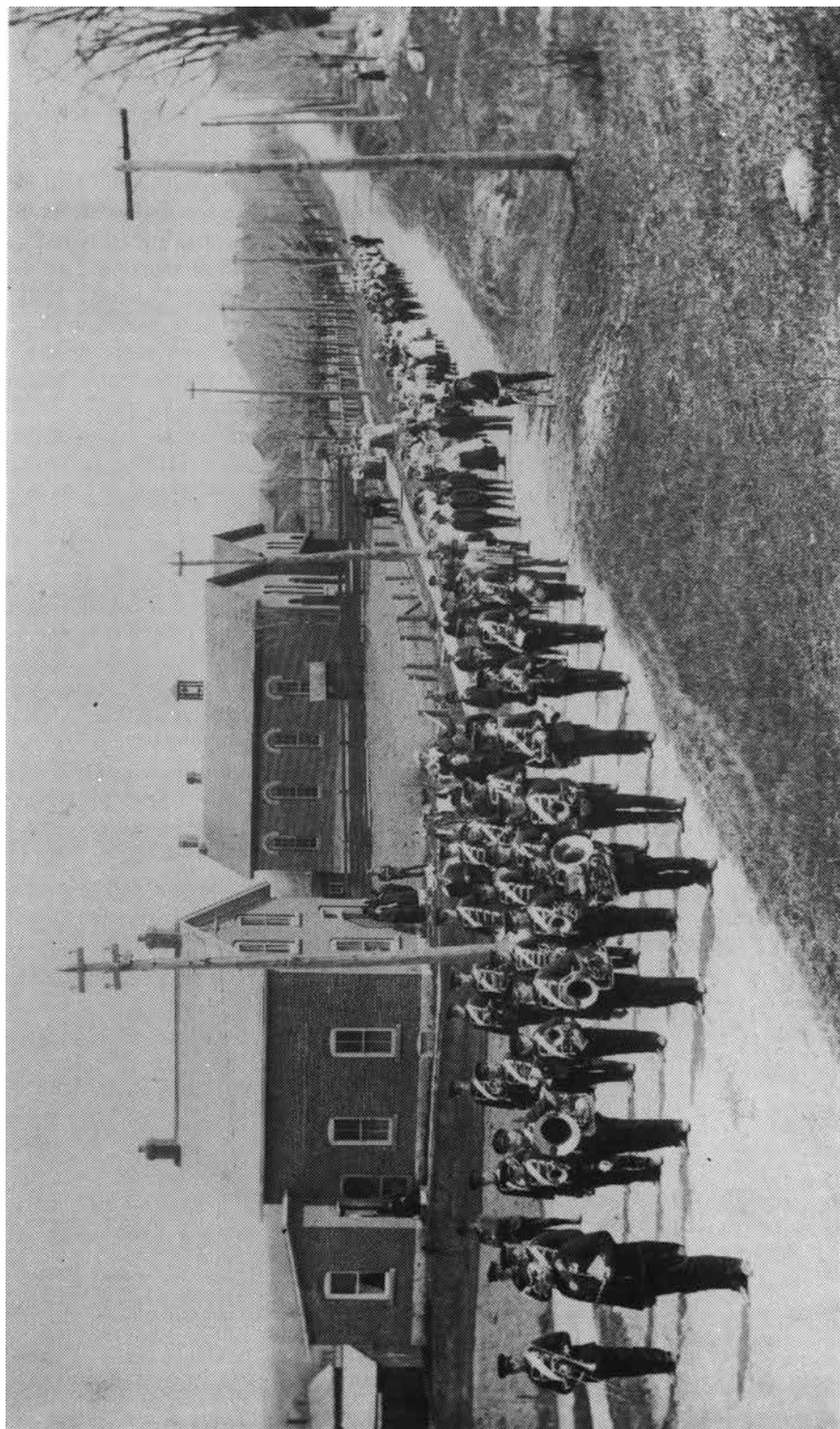
**Present day Alton General Store as it appeared in 1890**

May & Ethel Houston photo

The first Alton school was the typical log affair of the pioneer era, but was shortly changed to a frame and rough cast structure which eventually burned. The brick school was built in 1875 and enlarged in 1876. In the 1920's it even contained a continuation school (highschool), although these students are now bused to Orangeville. the original building serving only as a public school.

Even though Alton retains its small town charm. its aspirations of becoming an industrial centre are evident in early 19th century happenings. Cement sidewalks were installed on Main and Queen streets and all the way to the railway depot in 1904, giving the town a very metropolitan air. The work was contracted to John East of Orangeville at the rate of 11. ¢ per foot . and much of his original handiwork still remains in some sections. In the same year the Bell Telephone Co. initiated service in town the Barber Bros. Carriage Works becoming the first subscribers. Also in 1904, John Deagle's "Cataract Electric Co." wired the town for electricity.

An interesting story has been told concerning Deagle and a helper who were installing wire in one of the local churches. Deagle broke for lunch and instructed the employee to complete a connection on the roof. Upon returning an hour later, no employee was to be found. Deagle then entered the building and was horrified to find a pair of legs dangling through the high plastered ceiling. It seems the roof had given way, yet not enough to send the man crashing through. He had been caught and wedged by the rafters and it took much puffing and pulling to extricate him. The ceiling was then patched at Deagle's expense but it is safe to say that he regained his loss by the faithful provision of hydro to the town over the next twenty years.



Alton Citizen's Band on third line-school appears in the background — May 24, 1907. May & Ethel Houston photo

# *Industry*

As was mentioned earlier the main source of Alton's industrial ambitions stemmed from little Shaw's Creek which flows through the town. The drop in elevation along its length provided satisfactory in supplying power to the early mills, while its continuous flow in the early years ensured year-round production. One of the first mills to use the stream was a saw mill erected by William McClellan in 1840.

Three other saw mills were operated while the timber lasted and were responsible for the construction of all the early residences and commercial establishments in town.

Use of local wood was also made by a man named Henry Ford who established a small furniture factory near the present town hall.

As farming and grain production established itself within the region, a demand grew for grist and chopping mills. The first was built in the 1840's by the Wright Bros. on 3rd line where it crosses Shaw's Creek. D. McCutcheon built a grist mill to the north-east of the village in 1863 that was eventually taken over by McKinnon. The mill had been completely renovated, but a fire broke out in the upper storeys in Oct. of 1895 and the building was lost.

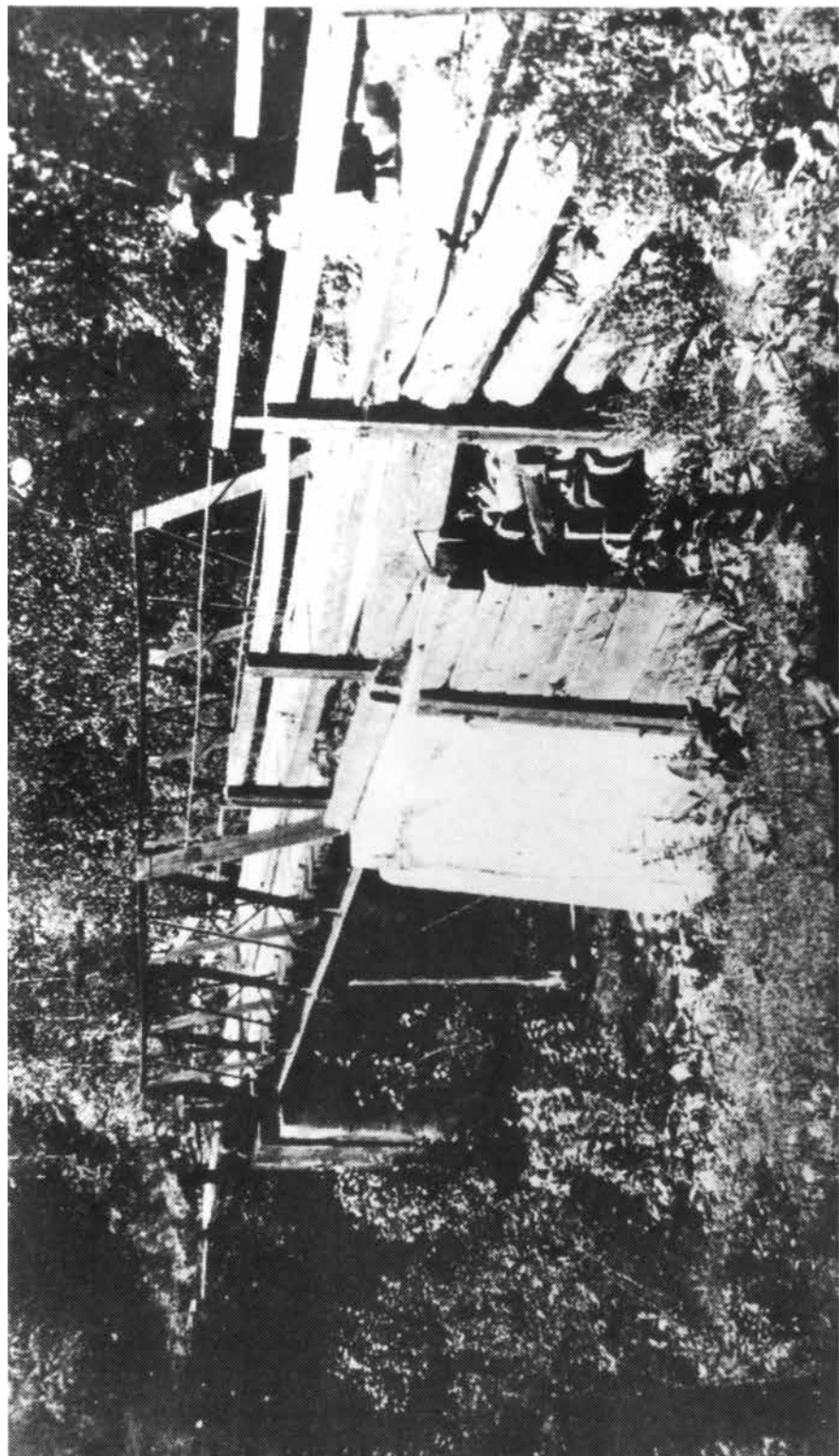
Two of Alton's major industries were the woolen mills of Dods and Algie. Dod's mill, or the "Upper Mill" as it was known, was a frame building originally built by William McClellan and was reported to have produced yarn and blankets as early as 1845. This operation was purchased by Benjamin Ward of Cataract and rebuilt as a stone structure in 1880 and shortly thereafter taken over by John M. Dods. The "Dods Knitting Co." did a thriving business during the First World War years but eventually moved to Orangeville in the 1930's. The building was then taken over by the Toronto Millstock Co. but soon fell idle and was sold. The "Upper Mill" still stands, however, serving as "McKenzie's Mill", a restaurant and boutique which caters to Sunday tourists in the area.

An interesting story has been told concerning Dod's Mill. In the 1920's, a meteor of large size landed in the mill pond with a tremendous splash. Due to the great heat, the water boiled and the entire pond was too hot to swim in for a number of days. It would be interesting to see if the meteorite is still there, although it probably buried itself too deep in the floor of the pond to be identified today.





**Dod's Woolen Mill and penstock - 1890** Mrs. Gordon Adams photo



Typical bridge built by the Dominion (Alton) Foundry, photo taken just  
off the Forks of the Credit Road at Brimstone in the 1920's

R. Beaumont photo



William Algie arrived in Alton in the late 1870's, constructing the "Lower Mill" in 1881. The Algie mill was a large three storey stone affair which has undergone so many changes over the years that it is difficult to find where the original stone ends and the new additions begin. The first major renovation as such, occurred as a result of yet another "Alton Fire." The Brampton Conservator of Nov. 12, 1908 gives the following account;

*"Alton Woolen Mills Burned; 60 Persons Out of Work"*

*"William Algie's big Woolen Mills at Alton were destroyed by fire on Friday morning last."*

*"The fire started in the card room about 7:30 o'clock. So rapidly did the flames spread that some of the employees were forced to fly from the building without their coats and hats."*

*"As there is no fire protection, and as there was a high wind blowing, it was impossible to save anything of an inflammable nature."*

*"An emergency call brought a number firemen from Orangeville, who with the people of the village, used buckets and pails with good effect and finally got the fire under control."*

*"The loss to Mr. Algie is very serious especially in view of the condition of the woolen trade in Canada at the present time. Considerable insurance was carried, but not nearly sufficient to cover the loss."*

*"Mr. Algie erected the mill in 1881 and twice increased its capacity since that time. Sixty hands were employed at the time of the fire, the monthly payroll being \$ 1300. Mr. Algie was in Toronto when the fire occurred."*

The Beaver Woolen Mills, as it was called, operated successfully for many years after the fire, although was purchased by J. M. Dods in the 1920's who operated it in conjunction with the "Upper Mill". The "Lower Mill" was sold to the Stubbs family in 1935, who formed the "Western Rubber Co." which still owns and operates the building, and is thus the only original mill still in daily operation in the northern Credit region.

A number of other industries located themselves in Alton and while they had little to do with the river's supply of power, are certainly worth mention. The first was Alexander Dick's Foundry, located beside the library on Queen Street and backing on the river. The business was originally started by George Dods in 1850 as an axe and tool factory, but was later purchased by Dick and moved to the larger building. Dick concentrated on the building and repair of farm machinery in the early years, although soon branched out into bridge building. The majority of early steel bridges in the valley were produced in the Alton Foundry and assembled at the site. The Orangeville Sun newspaper of the late 1800's contains many accounts of another "Alton Iron Works" bridge under construction. The only one known to the author as still being in existence, however, is the 3rd line bridge over the Credit at Cataract. Its ornate builder's plate has been smashed by vandals, while it is no longer passable for automobile traffic due to ice undermining its foundations.

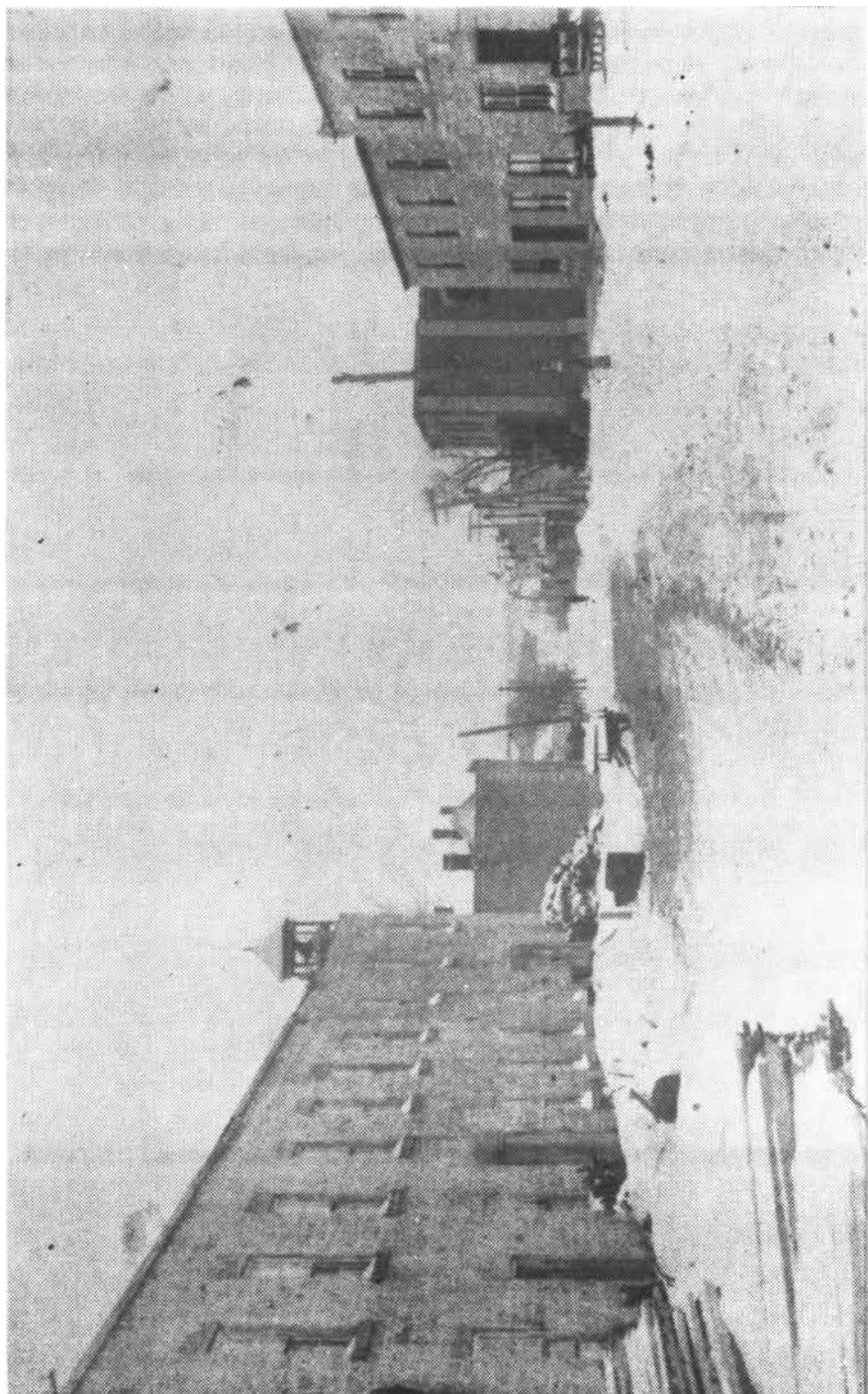
Very soon, this last example of Alexander Dick's work may meet the scrapper's torch. The Foundry building itself was gutted by fire in Dec. of 1901 with an uninsured loss of \$8000 and was never rebuilt.

Another Alton industry was the local building of carriages, sleighs and buggies by Boggs and Rowcliffe, and subsequently the Barber Bros. James Barber was born in 1846 and at the age of 14 learned blacksmithing under Edwin Rowcliffe. He then ventured to the states but on his return to Alton in 1870 started producing buggies in partnership with his brother Sam. The first buggies were of the open type, with the later leather topped models selling for \$180. The partnership of the Brothers was carried on without any signed agreement until the death of Sam in 1910. James retired from the business, over 500 buggies being built in that last year of operation.

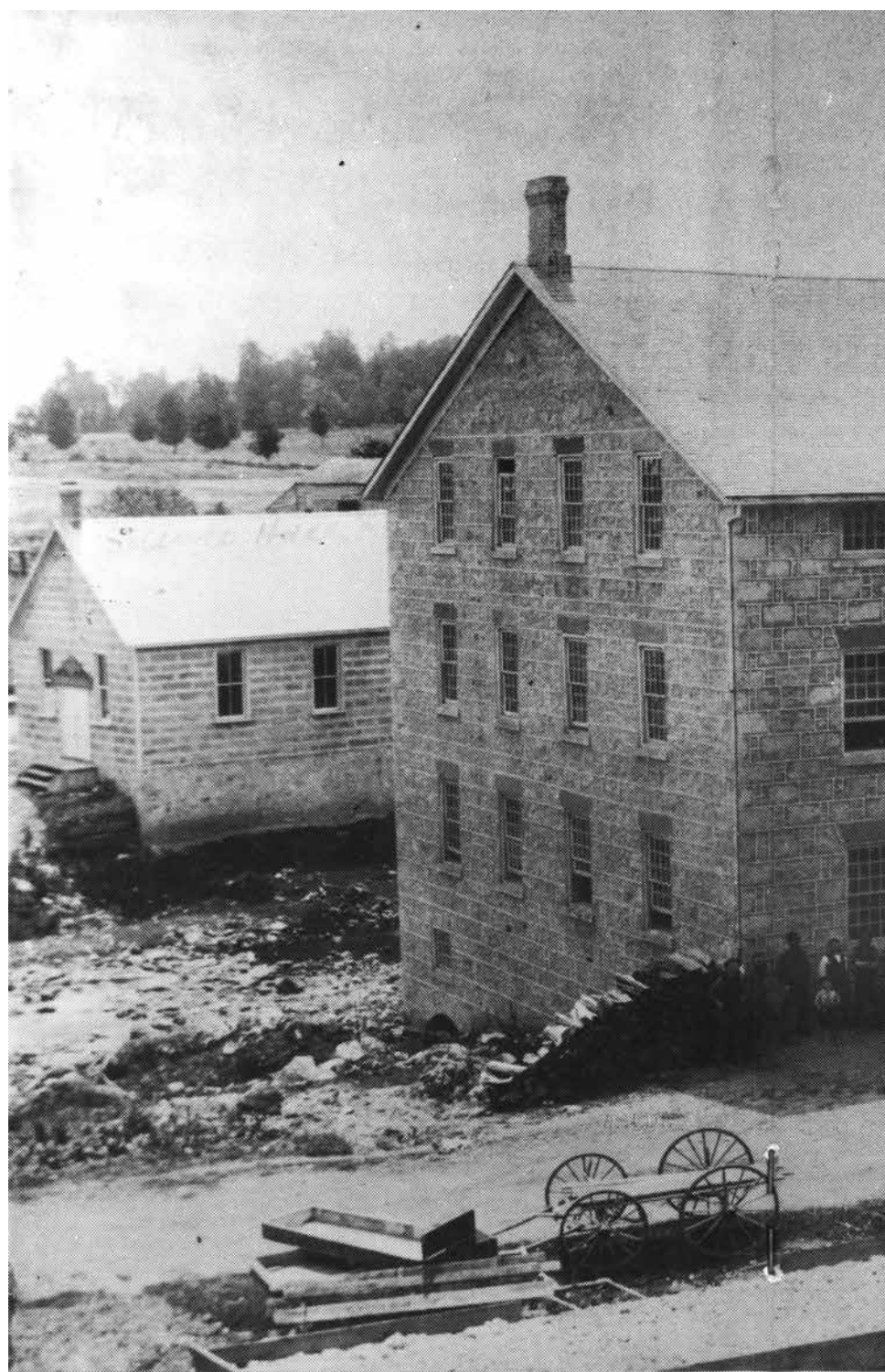
The original frame carriage works burned in 1892 but was replaced in 1894 with a large stone building that housed both the Barber Bros. and the Boggs & Rowcliffe firm. Everton Barber, James' son, converted the building to a paint shop with the advent of the automobile, but the building was eventually sold to the Western Rubber Co. for use as a warehouse in 1950. A point of interest is that the building was taken over in 1914 for use as a shell and munitions factory in aid of the war effort. Everton Barber and Alexander Dick ran the business, while John Deagle of the Cataract Electric Co. and his assistant, a Mr. Poole, bought and placed the machinery and set up the tooling and dies. Over 150 people were employed in the effort, (mostly women), working in two shifts for the duration of the war. To-day, the building still stands and has been completely renovated, the exterior being an excellent architectural example of early stone construction and design.



Typical Barber Bros. sleigh on Queen St. at the turn-of-the-century May & Ethel Houston photo



Queen St. looking east in 1900 - Dick's Dominion Foundry and the library are to the left, while the Barber Bros. are to the right. Mrs. Gordon Adams photo





**Beaver Woolen Mills - 1890 - Science Hall appears in the background** W.H. Dame photo



The last major industry of Alton was the lime quarries adjacent to the Toronto, Grey and Bruce Railway at the far eastern end of town. Originally opened by Jamison

& Carrol by 1870. they were eventually sold to the Canadian Gypsum & Alabastine

Co. who operated them in the last years. Tons of building stone were taken from the area by the railway which constructed an intricate network of sidings to service the operations. Two significant traces of the quarries remain, one being a large stone limekiln (still complete with specially prepared English fire bricks). and the other, a two storey stone boarding house constructed to house the quarrymen. Both have not seen use for many decades and will soon be lost as exceptionally large examples of early Ontario stonework. This especially applies to the limekiln, as none of the similar relics in the valley are in such fine exterior condition.



**Boarding house at the quarries as it appears to-day** R. Beaumont photo



**Limekiln at the quarries** R. Beaumont photo

# The Great Flood

Aside from what seems to be an unusually large number of fires, the worst tragedy to hit the whole of Alton was the great flood of 1889. The disaster is best described by the following paraphrased account. found in the Nov. 14. 1889 edition of the Brampton \ Conservator.

## Calamity At Alton

*“It is said to have been just about 3:30 a.m. Wednesday, when the water in McClelland Bros. mill dam succeeded in breaking its bounds. The dam had for some time been considered unsafe. and twice during the past year gave trouble by breaking away. The centre post of the waste weir gave way levelling all other supports in a moment: a body of water 16 feet deep was at once released and the whole 7 acres of water contained in the dam dashed down the valley. Had there been no other dams, the loss would have been trivial. but as the waters rushed down the incline it carried off dam after dam. each increasing the fury of the torrent.*

*Below McClelland's the torrent launched itself into the dam of B. Ward's and J. Dod's. "Alton Knitting Mill", which was forced out releasing five acres more of water. The rolling mass soon reached the millpond of Mr. Wm. Algie's, "Beaver Knitting Mills". The waste weir of Mr. Algie's dam was more strongly built than any of the others. and it is to this fact that many of the inhabitants owe their lives.*

*The weir bravely held its own against the force of the water for nearly half an hour. the torrent only escaping after cutting through a six foot embankment for a distance of six feet. Mr. Algie's mill was completely gutted, the foundations being sapped and all the machinery twisted out of shape. A boulder of over 3 tons was carried from the vicinity of the dam to the back of the mill, a distance of 50 yards, while an iron dye kettle weighing a ton and a half was also playfully lifted by the current and deposited further down the valley.*

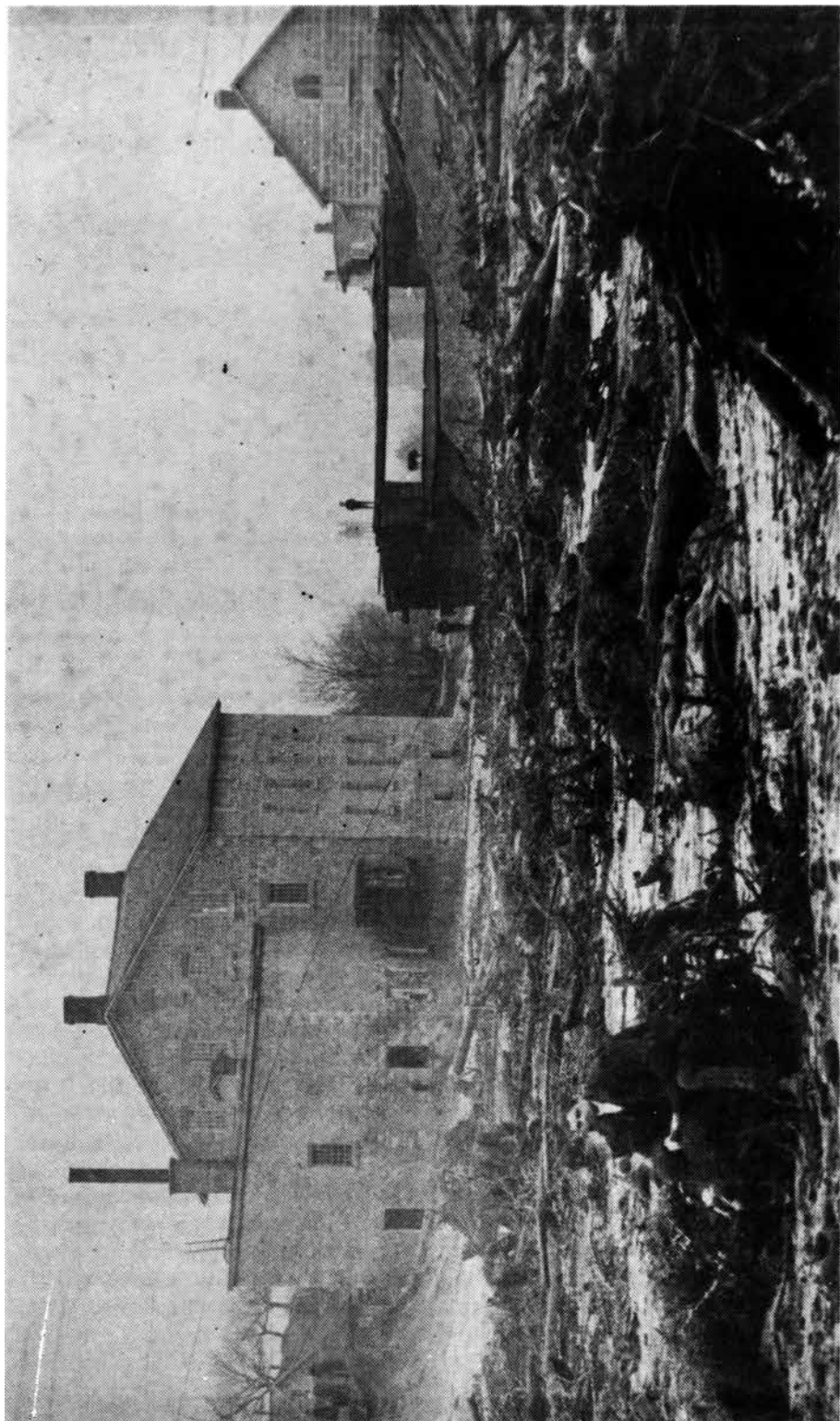
*The next dam on the stream was that of Mr. Alex. Dick of the Dominion (Alton) Foundry. One side of the two storey stone structure was undermined and fell with a crash into the river, while the moulding shop of the foundry, a one storey building standing more directly in the way of the rushing water, melted like snow in June.*

*The mill pond owned by R. Meek of the Alton Flour Mills was the next to crumble, and there is scarcely a vestige of the one time dam.*

## Scene of Death

*In the valley below Meek's dam there were three small frame houses, the first occupied by the aged Mr. & Mrs. John Harris. This house was torn to atoms and both occupants were killed. The body of Mr. Harris was found at eight o'clock one hundred yards from where his house had stood. The remains of Mrs. Harris have not yet been recovered"(note; Mrs. Harris was later found down river, with a pouch containing \$50 strapped to her waist. She always carried the money on her person in order to at least have the funds with which to be buried in the advent of her death.)*





Beaver Woolen Mill and pond after the 1889 flood May & Ethel Houston photo



The third line bridge over Shaw's Creek after the 1889 flood, scene of the death of Mr. & Mrs. J. Harris

Alton Tweedsmuir History photo

### *A Thrilling Experience*

*"The experience of Thomas Whetman, Mr. Harris' next door neighbour, was a thrilling one. and his escape is regarded as almost miraculous. He, his wife and their two children were asleep when the water came upon them. Before he had time to think they were all awakened and found themselves struggling in the water. He seized his little girl with his left arm and with his right hand grasped the top of the half open door. The water rose eight feet and carried them to the top of the ceiling. Meanwhile, what had become of the 4 months old baby girl that had been sleeping peacefully in its cradle? Both father and mother had given it up as lost forever, but after a quick search they found it, almost buried in mud, in one corner, gasping, but still alive."*

Thus is the Brampton paper's account of the Great Alton Flood. In damage estimates. it far exceeded Hurricane Hazel for as the story states. there was much more industry on the river at that time. and many more dams with their backlogs of water to be sent hurtling down the river. At present, only Dod's Mill (McKenzie's) and Algie's Mill (Western Rubber Co.) remain of the group mentioned in the newspaper account. and it is doubtful that such a tragedy will occur again.

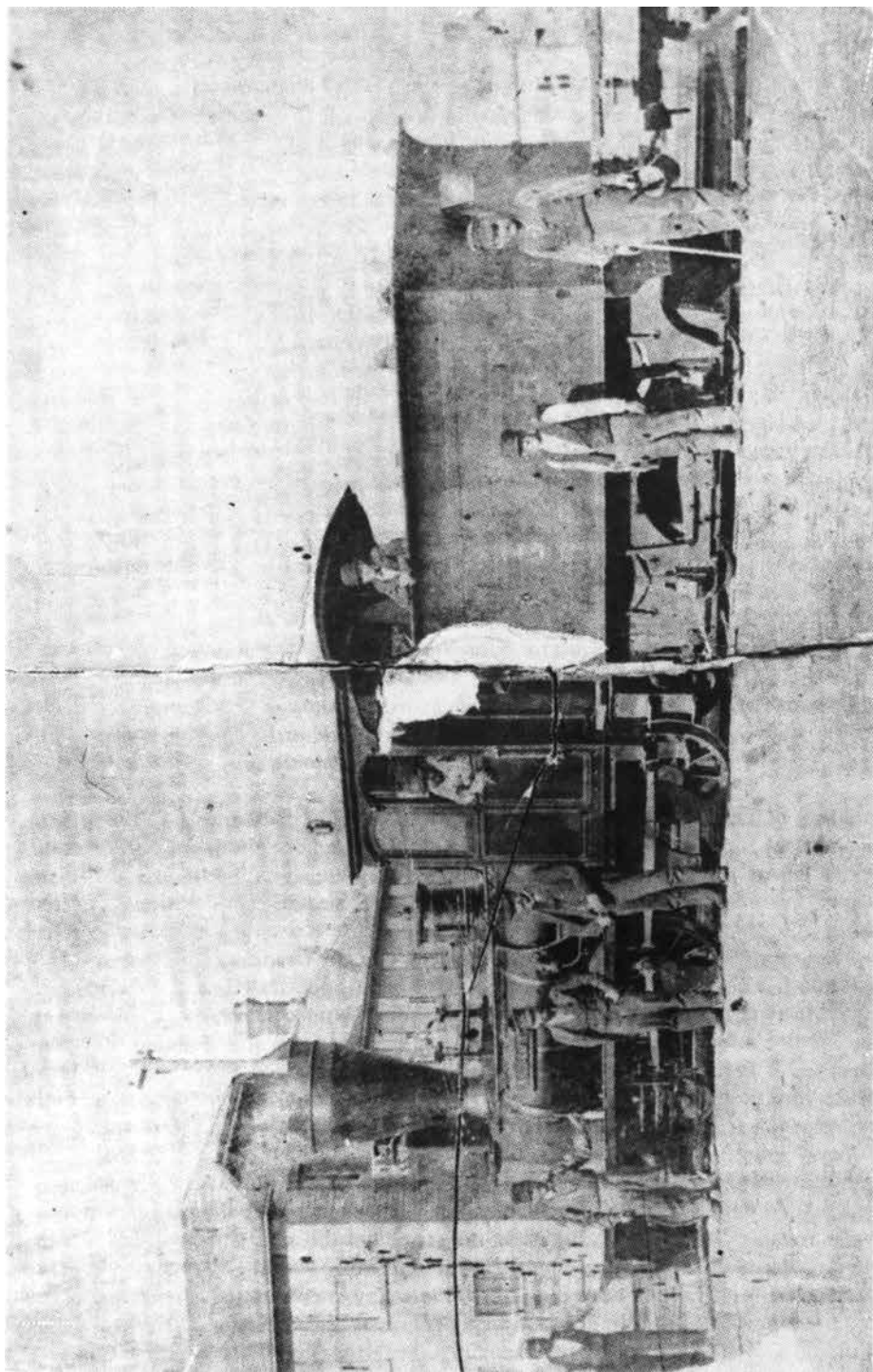
# Railways

In the latter half of the 19th century, it may safely be said that the small towns of southern Ontario were either made or broken with the coming of the railways. Evidence of this is given by the towns of Churchville, Huttonville and many others in the valley which stagnated when the surveyors of railroads bypassed their doors. Still others were born or relocated due to the routes of the steam cars. as when the town of Sligo was moved to the present location of Inglewood. Alton fared extremely well for a town of its size in this regard . for it was blessed with not one. but two rail lines. In 1861; Grey, Bruce and the northern reaches of Peel Counties were opening up to industry and farming, necessitating a cheap and swift link of communication to Lake Ontario. The roads of the early days were virtually impassable for heavy traffic due to winter snows, spring mud and summer dust. Grain merchant and promoter George Laidlaw recognized this problem and chartered his first northern venture through Peel County on March 4, 1868 in the form of the Toronto. Grey and Bruce Ry. A narrow gauge of 3'6" between the rails was designated as being the most practical (as opposed to the 4'8 1/2" width of standard gauge). with the route extending from Toronto via Bolton, Caledon, Alton and Orangeville and thence northward to Owen Sound. Construction commenced at Weston on Oct . 5. 1869, while a quote from T.F. McIlwraith's book on the Toronto. Grey and Bruce Ry. gives the following account;

*"The first train from Toronto to Alton Station arrived at the latter point on Mon. Apr. 10, 1871. President Gordon was aboard and after dinner that evening in Charleston (Caledon). stated that the railway would be open to Mount Forest in October; moreover. to Orangeville before July 1st . The latter announcement seems unnecessarily cautious. as rail reached Orangeville exactly seven days later."*

Alton Station on the "Bruce", as the railway was nicknamed. was on the present property of Judge Richardson on the east side of second line about one mile from the actual village. Extensive quarrying was carried on there. as has been previously mentioned, and a network of sidings were constructed to serve these operations. The first Bruce station agent for Alton was William Hawkins.

The second railway to pass by way of Alton was the Credit Valley Railway. This Was another Laidlaw venture, the line to Alton being opened in December of 1879. In contrast, the Credit Valley was built of the standard gauge and was routed directly up the Credit Valley through Streetsville. Brampton and Inglewood to service the towns the T.G. & B. had missed. The Credit Valley Railway passed a good mile closer to Alton than the "Bruce" line, and soon became the favoured of the two for both passenger and freight traffic. J.F. Holden became the first Alton agent for the Credit Valley. Eventually, in 1884, both the T.G. & B. and the Credit Valley Railway were purchased by the Canadian Pacific. The old "Bruce" line was changed from narrow gauge to match with the existing standard gauge. but the redundancy of the two sets of track became readily apparent to the C. P.R. Traffic over the "Bruce" to Caledon and Bolton was gradually rerouted down the valley line. until the former tracks sat idle the majority of the time. Finally, in 1933, the rails were torn up from Melville Junction to Bolton and trains traversed the scenic Horseshoe Curve south of Caledon no more. The original line of the C.V. R. is still much in use by the C.P.R however. and its Credit Valley days are kept alive by steam railfan excursions.



Toronto, Grey and Bruce narrow gauge locomotive at Orangeville 1870's H. Brooks photo



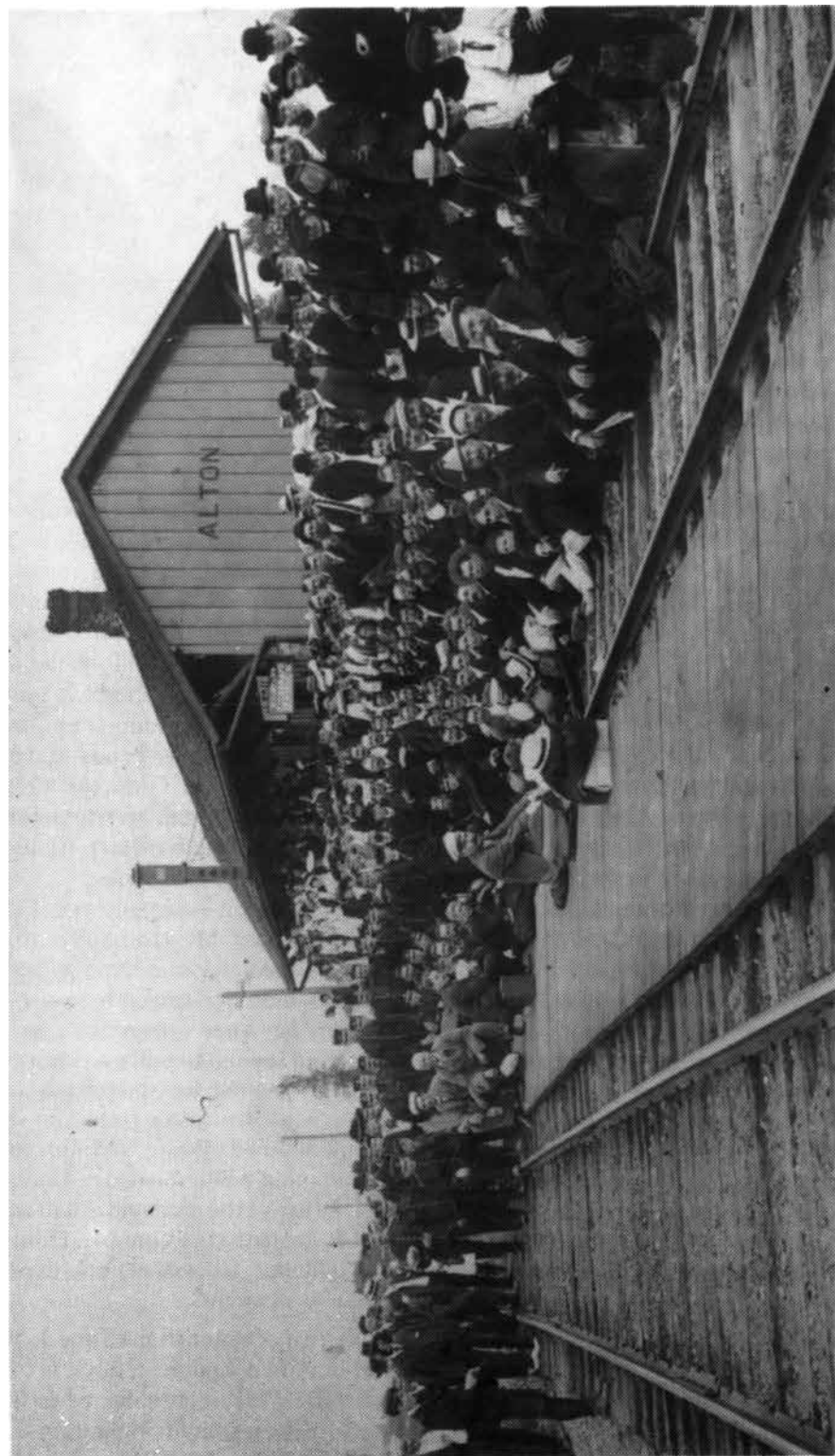
While railroading near Alton did not encounter the train robberies and wrecks of the American west, the men that worked for the early lines were not without their colour and charm. One Alton resident who worked for the C.P.R. W. Maclam by name, put out a number of poems in the 1910's, a sample of which is the following:•

*Epitaph  
On the Burial of Crozier Dodd's Sow*

*You old black sow, we plant you now, and what more can we do,  
For Gentile's meat, you're good to eat, Though cursed by every Jew.*

*Upon this sod you've often trod, When you were in your youth.  
But your end it came. and you're to blame,  
For trespassing on the Bruce.*

The "Bruce" did have its share of wrecks and pile-ups, although since the worst was the Horseshoe Curve wreck of 1907, its locality near Caledon exempts it from this book. The Credit Valley was singularly devoid of major collisions, but a verbal entanglement occurred between a C.P.R. official and Alton's Wylie Houston that deserves mention. It seems that Mr. Houston had taken over a dilapidated shed on C.P.R. property for use as a ware and potato house. Since the building had long been disused and Mr. Houston was the primary Alton resident still shipping by rail, no mention of this was made. Over a period of 45 years the building was almost totally rebuilt, complete with locks and a new roof in order to store goods ready for shipment. One day, however, Mr. Houston received a letter from the C.P.R. superintendent instructing him to pay 45 year's worth of back rent on the building. Moreover, the official would be arriving the next week on the 8 o'clock train and would Mr. Houston kindly meet him at the station with the cheque? Needless to say, Wylie Houston was out raged at the letter, especially as it was he who had rebuilt the structure. On the day of the train's arrival, Mr. Houston ventured to the station. Finally the engine came into view and glided to stop amidst the bustling activity that accompanied train time. Greetings were exchanged between Mr. Houston and the disembarking passengers, for he knew them all, yet no superintendent was to be found. The train whistled and started to pull away but continued on only to the railway crossing where it again stopped, leaving the steps of a trim and proper official's business car parked at Mr. Houston's feet. The supt. emerged on the platform but before he could climb down, Wylie told him in no uncertain terms what he could do with his shed. Train, and whole darned railway. It's a recorded fact that no rent was ever collected for the use of the shed and also that little traffic was ever gleaned from Alton by the C.P.R. from that day on. Mr. Houston received goods from the C.N.R. at Inglewood and had them trucked at extra expense to Alton, the C.P.R. having lost one of its largest local clients. The railway did have its admirers, however, and an account in the June 1, 1911 edition of the Orangeville Sun relates the experience of two American boys. It seems that they were accidentally sealed into a boxcar in Seattle, Washington, but when freed simply decided to continue the trip. They hitched rides on freights right across the country and into Canada until they arrived in Orangeville, where they were finally caught and jailed. As they were under age, no serious court action was taken, the boys then being taken to the farm of Peter Edwards near Caledon lake for recuperation until arrangements could be made for their return passage home.



Alton station on the Credit Valley - July 30, 1904 H.D. McClellan photo

# *Culture & Fun*

Life in the 19th century may have been harder than it is to-day, due in part to the lack of modern conveniences, yet it was not necessarily all work and no play. In turn, the community of Alton was blessed with spirited and culture minded leaders that lead to its becoming one of the most advanced towns of its day, especially considering its size. The primary source of this cultural and community drive lay in the family of Mathew Algie Sr. and William Algie who arrived in the late 1870's. Their industrial effort, the "Beaver Woolen Mills", was only a portion of their beneficial effect on the town.

William Algie was born in Scotland and immigrated to Canada with his parents. He was of the group of men who held religious beliefs called "Free Thinkers". Or atheists as they are known to-day. In a small 19th century town, one had to be very influential to be accepted with such views and it is a credit to the man that he was not only loved by the people, but led them in cultural pursuits. The "Free Thinkers" felt that science was the answer to all and that books and knowledge should replace the obscure ramblings of the church. With a man of this nature, Alton society very quickly developed a refined and metropolitan atmosphere. "Through William Algie's efforts, not only did Alton have the usual Citizen's Band, but at one time sported a full scale orchestra. A Science Hall was built by Algie in 1885 on his property directly across the river from the mill, now the Western Rubber Co. The hall soon became the setting for countless concerts, plays and recitals, while guests from Europe and the States frequently lectured within its walls. The Hall also housed Alton's own drama club, headed by William's brother, Robert Algie. The Science Hall still stands, serving as a private dwelling.

In 1882, three years before the Science Hall, interest was created for the founding of a local library, or a Mechanic's Institute as they were then known. J.L.Meek donated the land for the small frame building, but this was shortly changed to a more substantial brick structure. Money for the books and periodicals was raised by a series of debates, plays and musical entertainments. In the library's Constitution, Article #8 clearly states the scope of learning the Algie's wished the library to take. "No subject of religion or political controversy shall be introduced to any meeting of the institute". Perhaps it is due to this that the library still stands and sees continued use in its original capacity; a monument to the foresight of its founders over 90 years ago.

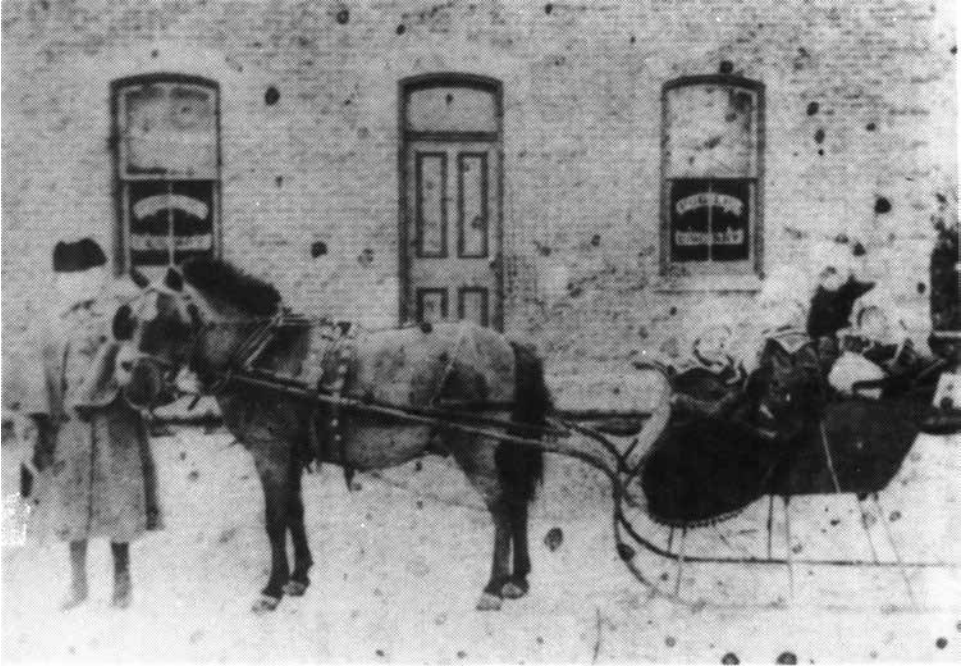
On the just plain fun side of Alton's life, the Algie's were the prime movers of one of the most popular fairs in Peel County. Salesmen or "Drummers" made frequent trips to rural towns to sell their wares, and were often asked by the Algies to stay for a snack. Eventually, an organized trade fair was arranged by the Algies and aptly named "The Drummer's Snack". This was usually held on the last weekend of July, commencing with a procession by a local band which met the drummers at the C.P.R. depot and escorted them to the Algie grounds.

The weekend from that point on was filled with entertainment such as concerts, races and contests, while the drummers sold their goods to the townsfolk and farmers who came from up to a 30 mile radius. The crowd camped out in the trend of present day rock concerts and were fed in a makeshift outdoor kitchen set up by Mrs. Algie. The kitchen was appropriately named the "Cyclone Cellar."



Portrait of William Algie and family - 1880's    May & Ethel Houston photo





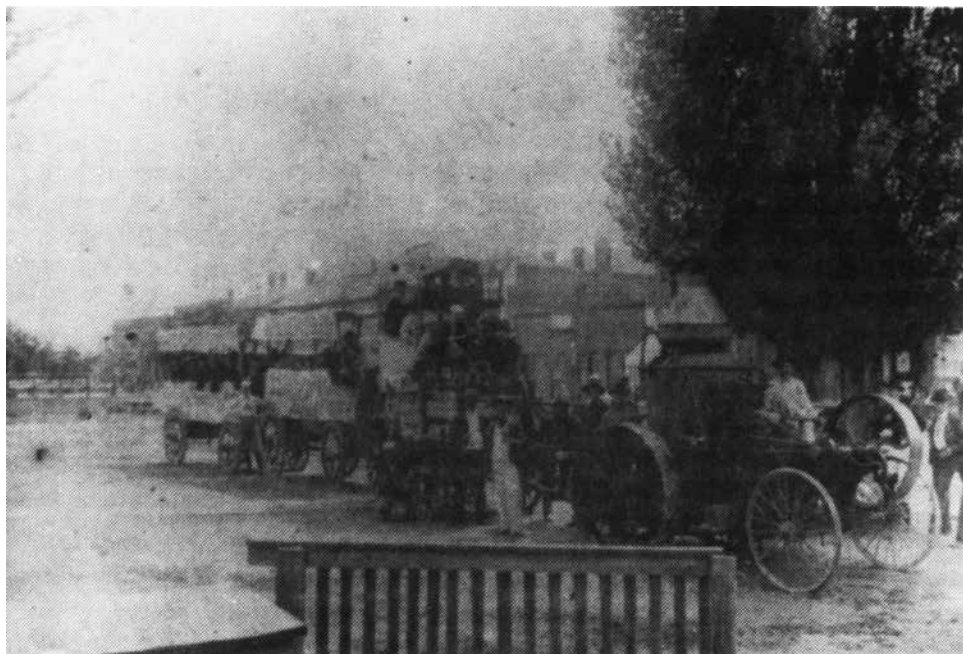
**A sleigh is parked in front of the library in this early 1900's view** Alton Tweedsmuir History photo

Alton was always noted for its fine baseball teams, the Alton Aetnas of the 1890's being coached by Robert Algie. Judging by the trophies appearing in the many old team photos, they took the county title a number of times. In conjunction with the transporting of the team to games with Alton's arch-rivals in Erin, two interesting stories have been told. In the first instance, Cyrus Madill had recently purchased a steam traction engine. The baseball fans decided that instead of taking the C.P.R. to Erin, they would hitch three wagons to the tractor and make their own "train". The railway train crew was put out at having lost their usual Saturday afternoon excursion business, and vowed playful revenge. They timed their arrival in Erin to coincide with that of the baseball team's, and deftly parked their locomotive across the road and walked away for lunch. The Alton Aetnas were not late for the game, but they did have to walk the remaining distance to Stanley Park.

In the second confrontation, the town of Alton fared much better. This time, Sam Boggs was engineer of the Alton "wagon train" and headed the excursion towards Erin, burning cedar fence rails along the route for fuel. Again, the railway train arrived at the Erin crossing at the same time, but did not see Boggs' "train". As he approached the crossing Boggs sounded his whistle and the train crew, fearing another engine on the line, ground their locomotive to a halt. Boggs continued on over the crossing at a steady 3 M.P.H. the Alton Aetnas not having to walk to the park due to his quick thinking.

While never possessing a park on the scale of Stanley Park in Erin, Alton did and still does have a very close rival in the form of the Caledon Lake Co. to the north of town. Incorporated on Aug. 24, 1889 it is believed to be the first private banding together of business men in a venture of this kind in Ontario. It seems that Caledon Lake, the source of Shaw's Creek, was excellent for boating and swimming and the local business men formed the Company in order to acquire the land for cottages. All the prominent citizens of Alton joined and the cottages of Dods and Algie still stand. The Caledon Hills are rarely thought of as summer cottage country, but among the first in Ontario were located here.

Although having nothing to do directly with culture and fun in the town of Alton, it is appropriate that the names of three townsmen be mentioned due to their contribution to Canada. First, Angus Crawford attained the distinction of becoming Canada's Checker Champion. In a more serious vein, William Algie of Alton is believed to have participated as a Canadian Trade Envoy to China in the late 1890's, and lectured on economics over much of the world. Lloyd Algie, the son of Dr. James Algie, was the only Peel County resident to be presented the Victoria Cross in World War I, this award being made posthumously after his death in 1918. Alton did its share in contributing to the growth of our country.



**Sam Boggs and his "train" ready for an excursion to Erin - 1900**

Alton Tweedsmuir History photo



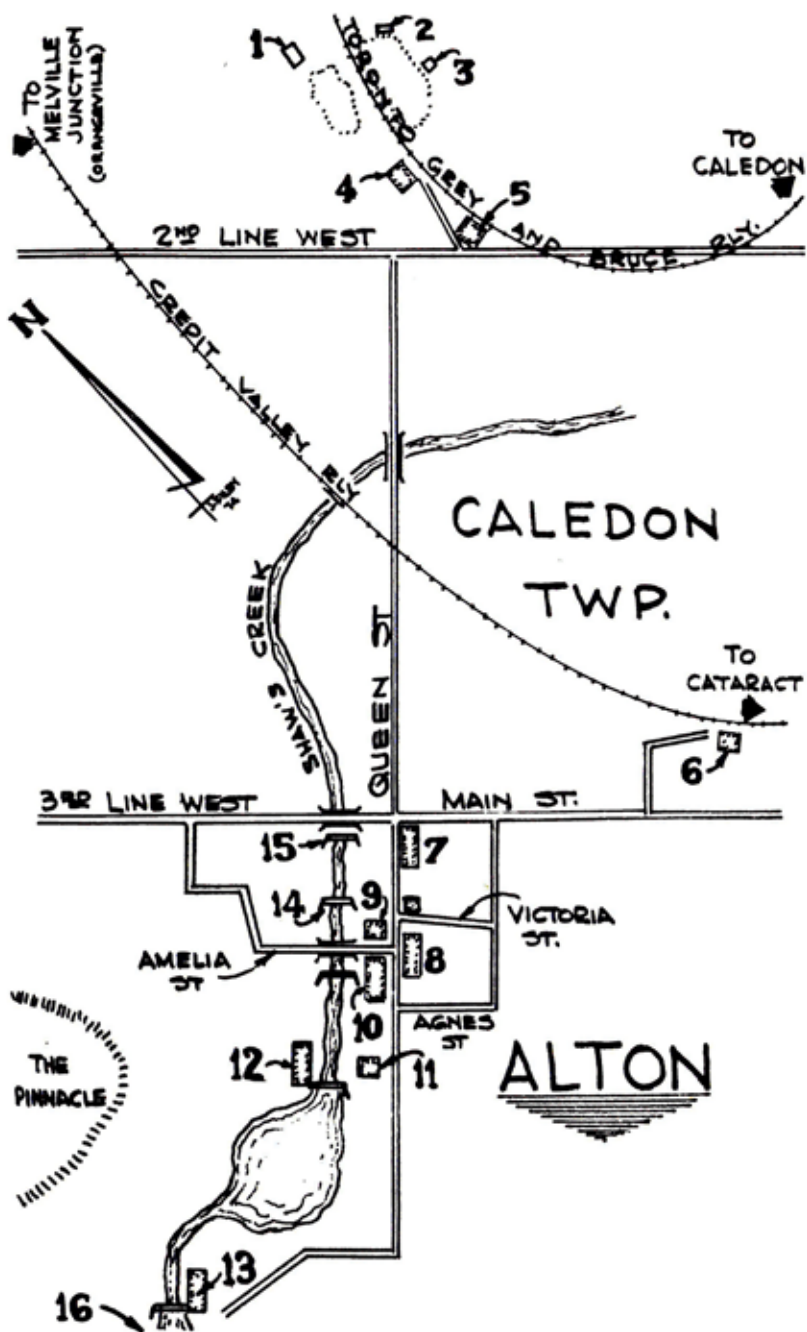
Alton Aetnas baseball team - 1890      May & Ethel Houston photo

# *Conclusions; Alton as a Prospect, not an Epitaph*

The foregoing pages have been an attempt to portray, in photos and in words, the comings and goings of an era now past. In many ways, Alton fits into the stereo-type of what a small 19th century town should be yet it may be seen that the principles on which it was built were more well laid than most. No great historical importance has been placed on the town to ensure its preservation. Yet the soul and flavour of its historical days lives on. It is true that Alton has declined, but the important fact remains that it has, not decayed. The seemingly ancient homes along its tree-lined streets are well maintained, while many of the churches, mills and public buildings not only stand but remain in daily use. At the same time, none of these buildings have been turned, by futile attempts at modernization, into the architectural monsters of so many "progressive" towns. Alton may be old and sleepy, but deep inside a heart still beats and I doubt that it will die.

## Legend

1. Quarrie Boarding House
2. Blacksmith Shop
3. Limekiln
4. G. & B. Rly. Depot
5. Rock Inn
6. C.V.R. Depot
7. Palmer House
8. Barber Bros.
9. Mechanic's Institute
10. Alton Dominion Foundry
11. Science Hall
12. Algie's Mill (Lower Mill)
13. Dod's Mill (Upper Mill)
14. Alton Flour Mills dam
15. Chopping Mill dam
16. McClellan's Mill









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