

UNSUNG HERO

ADMIRAL HENRY WOLSEY BAYFIELD, A MARITIME PIONEER, ISN'T WELL KNOWN. IN THE ONTARIO VILLAGE THAT BEARS HIS NAME, THERE'S A BOOMER-LED MOVEMENT TO CHANGE THAT. BY BEN FORREST



by Ben Forrest

On a Monday evening in late April, Mike Dietrich stood on a stage in the darkened auditorium at Bayfield Town Hall and recited the opening lines of a play about the life of Admiral Henry Wolsey Bayfield, the 19th-century British naval officer and hydrographic surveyor who charted the Great Lakes and other major waterways, trying to prevent shipwrecks and save lives.

Mike, a Boomer-aged actor, was in full costume as Admiral Bayfield, dressed in a blue naval officer's tunic with gold embroidery; billowy off-white short-pants with matching stockings; black shoes with silver buckles; and white mutton chop sideburns.

"Oh," he said, his voice soft and difficult to hear. "Good evening, everyone. My apologies. When I'm engrossed in my calculations, I tend to lose myself."

This was a dress rehearsal, and the lines did not come easily at first. He halted occasionally, perhaps nervous, as if remembering what to say. But he soon found his stride, rattling off Admiral Bayfield's long list of accomplishments with ease.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I freely own that I was ambitious to complete the surveying of the Great Lakes and the St. Lawrence River, as well as the coastlines, bays and harbour inlets of the Maritime provinces," he said.

"I've spent the past 50 years of my life fulfilling this passion, and have published what I hope will be readily-used to guide ships through the difficult waters of the Maritimes and St. Lawrence."

Admiral Bayfield also charted and described thousands

of islands on the north shores of Georgian Bay and Lake Huron. His work provided the foundation for hydrography in Canada. He was the first to collect samples of rocks and mineral specimens from Lake Superior, and along the way he had developed a love of astronomy.

"These weren't always my passions," said Mike-as-Admiral, reciting lines from the play.

"I'd expected that my career would follow Lord Nelson's footsteps, into battle against the French and the Spanish in the service of my king in the Royal Navy."

Moments later, the scene was over. Mike left the stage, and two new actors found their marks — Ian Rutherford, who played Admiral Bayfield as a younger man, and Steve Baker, who played Capt. William Fitz Owen, his commanding officer.

This play was a work of fiction, written by the prolific Huron County playwright and novelist Judy Keightley, and performed at Bayfield Town Hall in April, but it was rooted in fact.

Admiral Bayfield's remarkable achievements were a product of decades of careful, meticulous work, carried out in relative solitude.

"We feel he should be recognized — the unsung hero," Judy told *Boomers* in an interview.

"Without his surveying of the lakes, chartering boats would have been almost impossible. It would have been hit-and-miss."



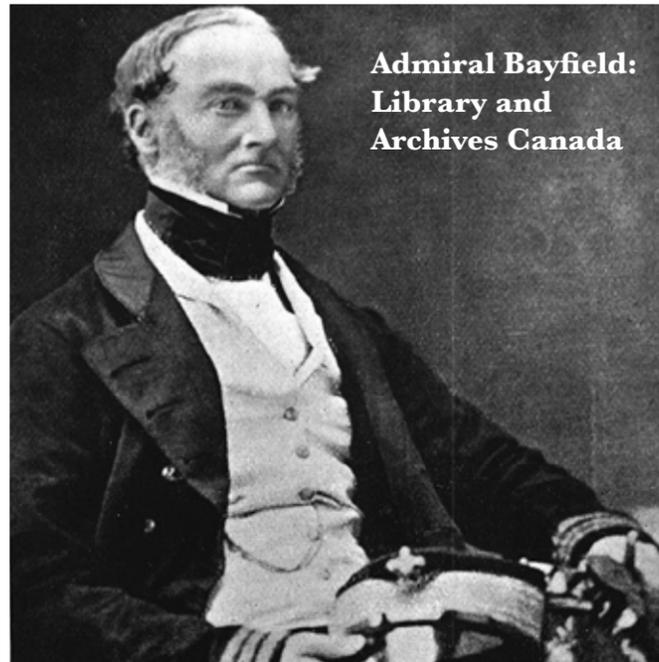
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Henry Wolsey Bayfield was born Jan. 21, 1795, in Kingston upon Hull, England, and entered the Royal Navy when he was just 11 years old.

He showed promise early, including in a battle near Gibraltar in 1806, and was promoted quickly. Henry served in the Mediterranean, off the coasts of France, Spain, Holland and the West Indies; and later in Quebec and Halifax, before joining the British flotilla on Lake Champlain in 1814.

In 1816, young Henry — then a lieutenant on the *Star*, a sloop in the Royal Navy's surveying service under Capt. Owen's command — helped with a survey of Lake Ontario and the upper St. Lawrence.

Henry is said to have shown remarkable talent for the work, and Capt. Owen persuaded him to stay on for surveys of Lakes Erie and Huron. When Capt. Owen returned to England the next year, Henry was placed in charge. He was 22 years old.

"Bayfield really did an amazing thing," Judy said. "There had been other cartographers before him, who charted the coastlines of the Great Lakes, but none of them were very accurate."

Henry completed his survey of Lake Erie in 1817 and began working on Lake Huron later that year. It took four years to survey Lake Huron and Georgian Bay, with the help of an assistant named Philip Edward Collins.

They battled ague and scurvy, and the mosquitoes and black flies they encountered drove Henry mad.

"Their bites covered us with blood while observing & we could not open our mouths without swallowing them," he wrote in his journal. "The torment of them is beyond description."

In 1823, Henry began surveying Lake Superior and is said to have met the Arctic explorer Capt. John Franklin in Fort William two years later, as Franklin prepared for his second (and ultimately doomed) Arctic expedition.

Henry made charts of the three lakes during a two-year furlough in England and convinced the Admiralty there was a need to survey the St. Lawrence River and the Gulf of St. Lawrence.

He spent the next 14 years on that task and systematically charted several other bodies of water, including Lac Saint-Pierre, a portion of the Saguenay River, the Strait of Belle Isle, the northern Gaspé coast, the Belle Isle coast of Newfoundland and the New Brunswick coast of the Northumberland Strait.

There was no guarantee he would survive. On one expedition, Henry and an assistant are said to have been marooned on a barren island for five days. According to Henry's journal, they hunted puffins and young gulls and collected mussels and clams to make their provisions last.

But the work was useful, and it afforded Henry a level of prestige and respect.

"Bayfield was frequently consulted by the Admiralty and the government of Lower Canada on problems concerning navigation," wrote his biographer, Ruth McKenzie.

"He was consulted on the best positions for lighthouses on the coasts and islands of the St. Lawrence, and later on the coasts of the Maritime provinces at Cape Pine, Nfld."

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The Village of Bayfield, on the shore of Lake Huron south of Goderich, is also said to be a product of Admiral Bayfield's advice.

He counselled Baron van Tuyll van Serooskerken, a British-born speculator and developer from a prominent family in the Netherlands, to buy more than 4,000 acres of land in the Huron Tract, including the parcel where the village now stands.

It's said that Henry Bayfield believed the village land was a perfect place for development, and sections of the Huron Tract were thought to be prime land for military outposts, although none materialized in his lifetime.

Today, the village is a thriving tourist centre with a vibrant group of Boomer-aged residents who are active in the local community. Bayfield harbour is also the largest pleasure craft marina on the Canadian side of Lake Huron.

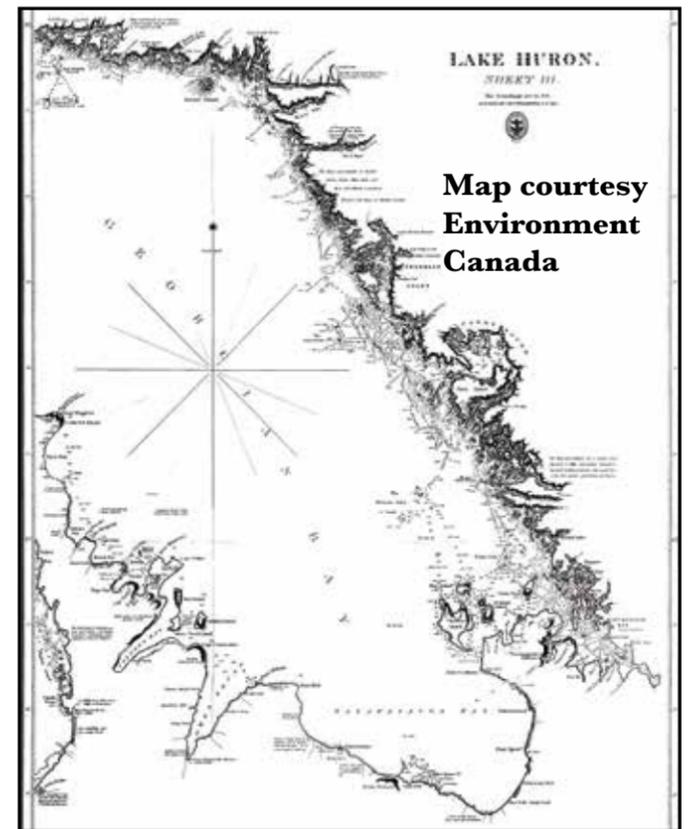
Henry Bayfield was a respected advisor to many influential people, but the main achievement of his surveying was a series of accurate charts that prevented countless shipwrecks on the busy St. Lawrence, and other bodies of water, each year.

"He's responsible for saving thousands and thousands of lives," said David Gillians, an author, researcher and past president of the Bayfield Historical Society, in a video the historical society produced.

"It was the first time that ships had any inkling of what they were in for when they came into Canadian waters."

Henry Bayfield was methodical in his work. He ran a tight, disciplined operation and held his assistants to high professional standards. His manner is said to have been formal but courteous and kind; still, he had little patience for incompetence. Sunday church services were held aboard the ships he commanded, a product of Henry's Anglican faith.

"He was very strict with his sailors," Judy said. "They were not allowed a single drop of drink once on board the boat He took his job very seriously, and my sense



Map courtesy
Environment
Canada

is that he was a very serious man."

Bayfield was largely self-trained as a surveyor, and his main instruments for determining latitude and longitude were chronometers and the sextant.

"He discovered many errors in the existing Admiralty charts which, he believed, had led to numerous shipwrecks with great loss of life," wrote his biographer Ruth McKenzie.

"His own charts and sailing directions were as accurate as he could make them and for over 50 years they, and those for Lake Ontario and the upper St. Lawrence which were partially his, guided innumerable ships through the treacherous waters of the St. Lawrence system."

In 1838, Henry Bayfield married Fanny Amelia Wright, an accomplished artist who is said to have had the same tutor as Queen Victoria.

They had six children together — four sons and two daughters — and when they moved to Charlottetown in

the early-1840s, Fanny taught drawing and music while Henry surveyed the coasts of Prince Edward Island and Nova Scotia.

Henry continued in his work, surveying the coast and harbours of Cape Breton Island, the Strait of Canso, Isle Madame and the Bras d'Or Lake. His last major project was surveying Halifax harbour.

In 1856, suffering rheumatism, Henry retired from active surveying and became a rear-admiral. He was promoted to vice-admiral in 1863 and admiral in 1867 and lived quietly in Charlottetown until he died in 1885 at age 90.

Today, there are several places in North America that bear his name, including a city in Wisconsin and community in Antigonish County, Nova Scotia. There is also a Bayfield Beach Provincial Park near Antigonish, and a Bayfield Inlet in Georgian Bay.

Several ships have been named in his honour, but the story of Henry Wolsey Bayfield is still not well known.

In Bayfield, Ont., there are ongoing efforts to change that. Judy's play, starring a small cast of amateur actors from the community, was one of several initiatives this past summer that celebrated the 200th anniversary of the completion of his survey of Lake Huron.

There are plans to erect a statue of Bayfield in the village, and possibly hold a Bayfield Regatta and an annual Henry Bayfield Day. What matters most, in the minds of many community members, is that Bayfield be remembered for his contributions to maritime history.

"We just want him to be recognized," Judy said. "And I think when people are humble — because I think he was a humble man — somebody has to sing their song for them." ■



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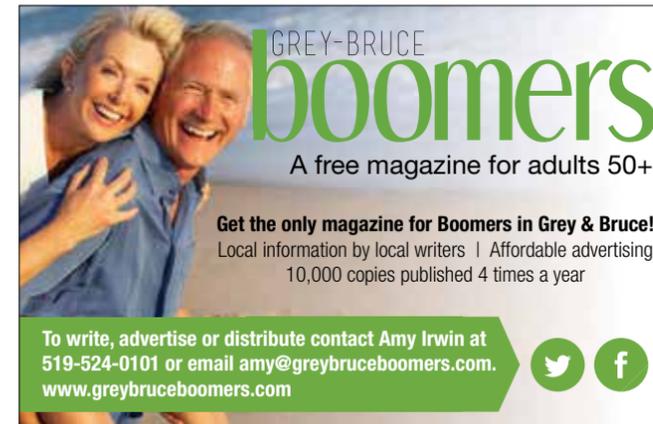
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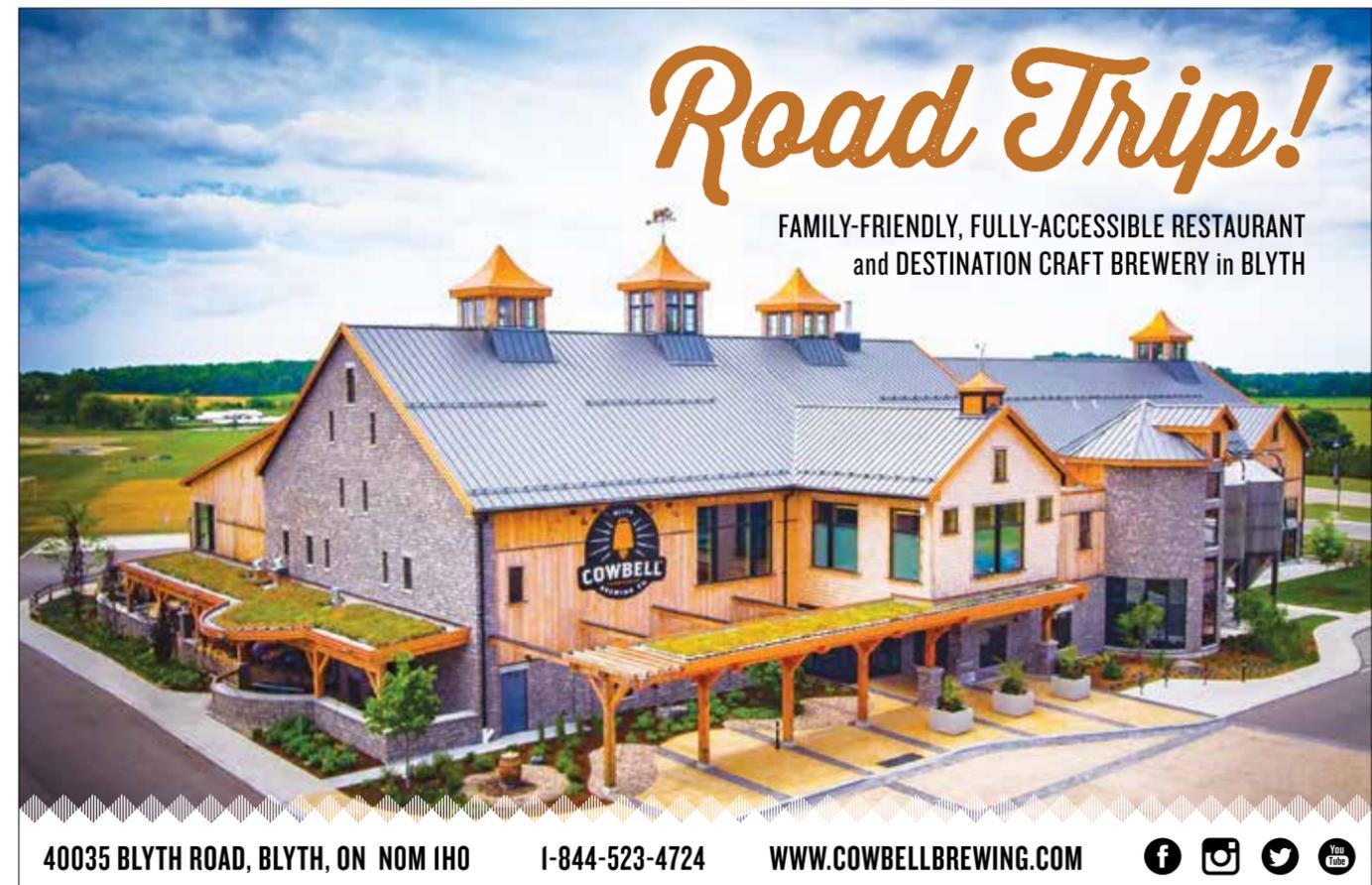
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