

IF THESE WALLS COULD TALK...

'THE RIDGE' HAS OVERLOOKED GODERICH SINCE THE TOWN'S BEGINNINGS BY JODI JEROME

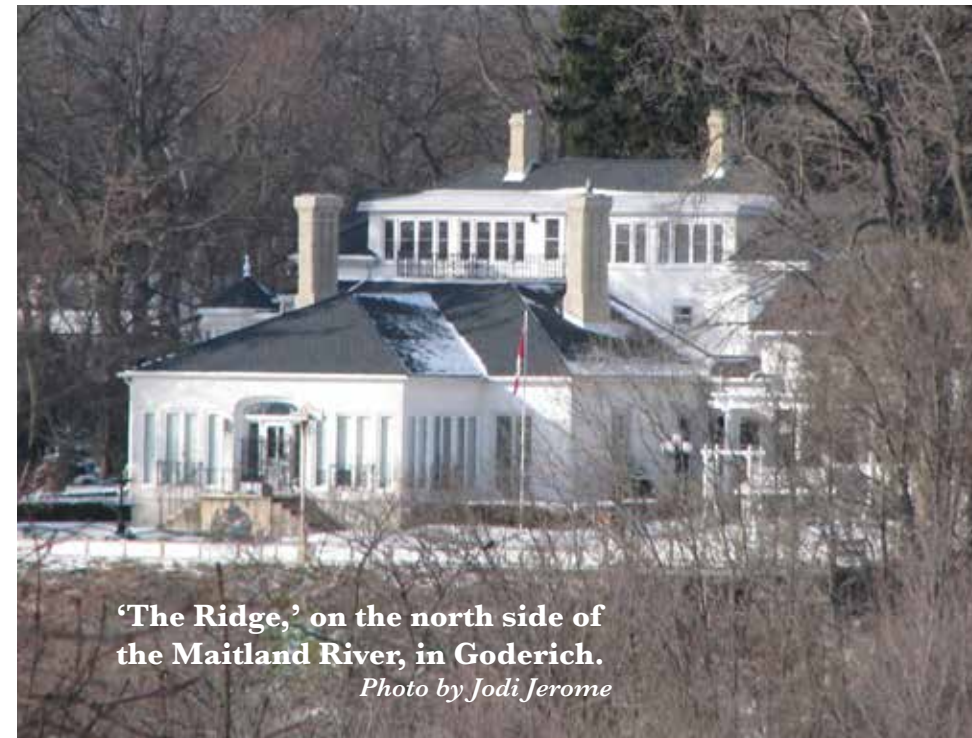
Fact is truly stranger than fiction when it comes to the stories and characters of 'The Ridge,' which overlooks Goderich from the north bank of the Maitland River.

Nestled like a jewel among the hardwoods of its cliff-top site, it incites curiosity about its origins. Its story begins beyond written time, when the land and river below was the summer camp of Indigenous groups who used its forests to hunt, its river to fish, and its fertile soil and river islands to plant and gather food for the winter ahead.

In June 1827, Tiger Dunlop and his survey crew, led by Indigenous guides, marked a trail from Guelph to Goderich for the English Crown's newly chartered land development company, The Canada Company. They stopped at the lake, in a river valley, which emptied into Lake Huron, shielded by high cliffs on both sides. That 1827 summer day, Dunlop and Galt recognized the location's future importance, "As the only port for a fertile country within many miles, and many millions of acres."

That evening, John Galt IV and Dr. Tiger Dunlop toasted their success with the last of two bottles of champagne purloined the previous winter in York (Toronto) by Galt's manservant after arriving in town after the taverns closed. That night they'd consumed one bottle.

by Jodi Jerome



'The Ridge,' on the north side of the Maitland River, in Goderich.
Photo by Jodi Jerome

Baron, thanks in part to his marriage to Marie Louise Guildmeester, daughter of the former Dutch consul-general to Portugal. When he learned about the potential profits to be had in land speculation through The Canada Company, he could not resist investigating further.

In 1833, upon the advice of Captain Wolsey Bayfield, Baron De Tuyll arranged to buy two large pieces of land, both located on the high ground at the mouth of a river emptying into Lake Huron – one was Bayfield, in Goderich Township, and the other became 'The Ridge' in Colborne Township, opposite the newly established Town of Goderich.

In Bayfield, Baron de Tuyll ordered the surveying and selling of lots to begin. On The Ridge, his factor,

Dunlop had kept the other for just such a celebration.

Edward C. Taylor, was instructed to build a 50' x 50' log villa. The result was a stylish, two-storey Regency Cottage, its hip roof crowned with an ornamental balustrade. Inside the first floor was a square hall with sliding doors opening onto each of the four large rooms as needed. Each room was warmed by a fireplace, with French doors opening onto the wraparound veranda over the basement, which contained the kitchen and servants' quarters. Baron de Tuyll apparently never lived to visit

Surveyors by land and lake soon followed their trail. After the surveyors came the settlers and developers. Baron Carel Lodewijk de Tuyll van Serooskerken (1791-1835), a newly-minted Dutch baron, was one such developer. During his time in England during the Napoleonic Wars, he made friends with businessmen and aristocracy that he kept in contact with after his return to the Netherlands. After the war, he fortuitously ascended to the title of



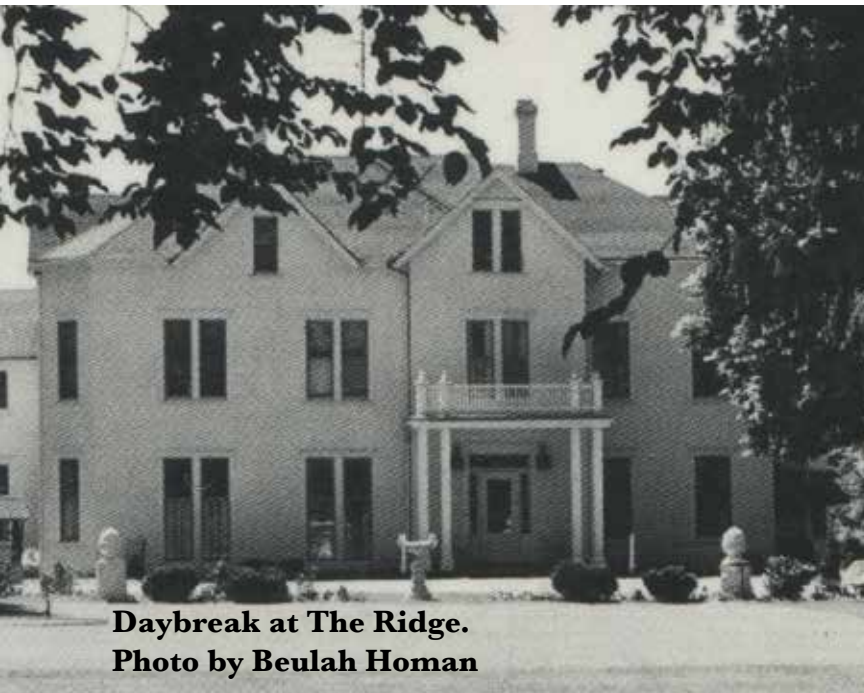
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Daybreak at The Ridge.
Photo by Beulah Homan

his New World villa, dying in 1835. It was his son, Baron Vincent Gildemeester De Tuyll van Serooskerken, who visited, hunted, fished, dazzled the ladies, and socialized.

In 1846, Baron Vincent returned for what was likely his last stay in The Ridge, after his 1844 marriage to Charlotte Henrietta Mansfield, who was not as fond of the wilderness society as her new husband. The de Tuylls soon left to visit Toronto and New York, wrangling by letter with The Canada Company instead of in person. Over the next few years, using revenue from more successful foreign investments and selling properties, he finally paid off his mortgage to The Canada Company, and gradually sold the land.

That same year, de Tuyll sold The Ridge villa and 31 acres to John Galt V, registrar of the United Counties of Huron and Perth and son of the venerable surveyor, who had opened the area to settlement in 1827. Galt, his pregnant wife Helen Lizars, and their daughter Agnes, 3, moved into The Ridge, joined within the year by their second child C. Blanche, the first child born at The Ridge. Three more children followed – Helen (1858), Magdalene (1860) and John VI (1861), filling The Ridge with their laughter and antics.

As they enlarged their family, they updated the log villa,

including covering its exterior in thick wood siding, which was covered in mortar and chiseled to look like ashlar stone blocks. Galt also enlarged the estate by 80 acres, while he planned sites for the fated town Gairbraid, while continuing his job as registrar. He'd held the position since his arrival from England in 1833 until his death in 1866. At the time of John Galt V's death, his son was only five years old. Helen and her three youngest children moved out of The Ridge and, by 1871, were living in Guelph, later moving to Stratford where she and her three children, then in their 20s, shared a house with her oldest daughter, Agnes Haldene and her family.

The Ridge and its lands went up for sale, advertised in the local paper and beyond. From 1866 until 1873, the Goderich ad read, "THE RIDGE PROPERTY, FOR SALE, THE RESIDENCE OF THE LATE JOHN GALT, Esq. - This property is beautifully situated opposite the Town of Goderich, on the North Bank of the RIVER MAITLAND, and on the Banks of Lake Huron. It contains 31 7-10 acres of Land more or less, with Dwelling House, Outhouses, Stables &c., with large Garden, Vinery and Orchard. The Wood Land consists principally of Oak and flowering Linden, Cherry, Maple &c. The Grounds are in very good order. There are three never failing springs of pure water on the Property. The situation for a private residence cannot be surpassed in the Province. For terms apply to THOS. GALT, Esq., Barrister, Toronto or D. Shade Gooding, Barrister, Goderich."

The log villa stayed empty, with only a caretaker, for almost six years. In the 1870s, an idea was floated about developing it into a public park. Before council voted, a gentleman from Baltimore offered \$4,500 cash for The Ridge. Henry Yarwood Attrill (1822-1892), the gentleman from Baltimore, was a Canadian living in the U.S. Born in Montreal, he was left in Canada with his younger brother in 1837 after his father died and his mother returned to England. Still, he made his own way, and his own fortune, starting a family with his wife Helen (1827-1900). They had four children – Elizabeth (1856-1906), Mary (1864), Grace (1864) and Edward (1870-1907).

Seemingly living in New York, Attrill invested either his

own money or others' wealth, in properties in Chicago, New Orleans, New York and New Hampshire. His landholdings and actions during and after the Chicago fire of 1871 got a street named after him. He travelled all over the U.S. and the world, patenting inventions, organizing investors for property developments, like Rockaway Beach Improvement Company, or the Equitable Gaslight Company of Baltimore, which were not always what they appeared. But what he built on The Ridge has lasted and still stands today.

The Ridge, by then renamed 'Ridgewood,' became Henry Attrill's retreat from his American business complications and legal fallouts, and a great place to invest his money. At Ridgewood, he built more than castles in the air. Between 1873 and '83, he enlarged the estate by 775 acres. He added a three-storey frame Victorian mansion to the existing two-storey log villa, complete with a tower room, elaborate gingerbread trim along its eaves, and porch lines. The new addition merged with the log villa. The size of the house required help to maintain it. In the 1881 census, four servants were listed as residents of Ridgewood – Sarah Abelson, 30, Annie Arnold, 30, John Tod, 20, and Hugh Connery, 20. On the farm, local resident John Buchanan was the foreman in charge of the workforce.

When Attrill expanded the house, he and William Farmer built a gas plant, similar to the one he patented in New South Wales and the U.S. in the 1880s. The gas plant was located in a cave built into the riverbank below the house.

Attrill expanded the farm, orchard and vinery. The Attrills' 2,500 apple, pear, plum and peach orchard

won prizes at the area fairs, as did their 50 varieties of award-winning grapes grown on the north bank of the Maitland River, as well as those grown under glass in the new greenhouse. Barns bursting with shorthorn cattle imported from prize-winning English breeders grazed in the fields, beside high-bred horses. Scottish shepherd Norman McLeod looked after the sheep, while a dairy plant was established to process the herd's milk and make cheese. Attrill also began drilling for salt, but was stopped by flooding at 250 feet below the surface. French and black labourers worked the mine and used 30 teams of mules to move the mine refuse and salt that was discovered. The cost of the enterprise exceeded \$80,000 and, though it had to be shut down, its efforts were duplicated across the river 83 years later with technology and tools not yet invented when Attrill attempted to mine salt, not brine.

When Attrill died in 1892, the troubles of his U.S. businesses and court cases did not die with him. For this reason, in 1894, his wife Helen transferred the ownership of Ridgewood to her eldest daughter Elizabeth and her son Edward. A small piece of the estate was sold in 1897 to D.F. Hamlin, who built the Menesetung Summer Hotel just west of today's Sky Harbour Airport.

Tragedy seemed to stalk the Attrills. After Helen died in 1900, her children moved into Goderich's Strachan House, though they continued to manage the estate's livestock program. Soon death followed. Elizabeth died in 1906 and Edward in 1907, leaving only Mary and Grace (Attrill) Heaton as family heirs and survivors.

From 1910-12, Ridgewood was leased to the Canadian Army, which was interested in buying the property for use



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by Jodi Jerome

as a military base, but looked elsewhere due to its non-negotiable price. In 1913, Oscar Fleming, a wealthy and influential Windsor lawyer, and his wife, Caroline Maud Drake, bought Ridgewood as their summer home. One of the first changes they made to the property was the addition of a nine hole registered golf course and tennis courts for his family and their guests' private use.

At the time of the 1913 sale, the house had 16 bedrooms, two bathrooms with modern plumbing, a library, dining room, and large basement with servants' quarters and kitchens. In addition to the house, there was the Factor's Cottage, the large greenhouse, barns and stables.

The Flemings filled the house with their children – Augusta (1890), Donald (1892), Francis (1894), Thelma (1895), Oscar E. (1897), Canmore (1899), Kenneth (1900), twins Hugh and Caroline (1903), Bertha (1905), and Jean (1907), as well as prominent guests in the summer. Guests came by water aboard the family's 52-foot pleasure cruiser, the Kittiwake, moored on the Maitland River, by motorcar, or in the Fleming's private Pullman railway car. When the First World War began in 1914, three of the Fleming boys, Donald, Oscar Jr. and Canmore, fought as officers, due to their education at Kingston's Royal Military College. All three came home.

Oscar Jr. interrupted his law studies to enrol with the Royal Air Force. He trained as a pilot and flew missions during the war. After peace was declared, he stayed on in Paris, drawn to the city by the love of an exciting woman. Antoinette Chanel was the sister of famous haute couture clothing designer, Coco Chanel. Antoinette worked in the Chanel boutiques and partied with the artists, nouveau riche and upper crust of Paris society. She and Oscar fell in love and were married the night of the Paris' Victory Ball, Nov. 11, 1919. One of the witnesses to their marriage, was Arthur Capel, tycoon and one of Coco Chanel's first lovers.

Oscar and Antoinette returned to Canada that December with Antoinette's trousseau of designer clothing and her French maid, who soon returned to Paris. Upon their arrival, his father insisted Oscar Jr. move to Toronto alone to concentrate on his studies, leaving Antoinette with her disapproving Ontario in-laws in Windsor.

Soon after she arrived, she began writing letters to her

sister expressing her desperate state of unhappiness, but Coco encouraged her to persevere.

Antoinette lasted until 1921, possibly spending the summer of 1920 at Ridgewood. In 1921, the family story is that she went to Argentina to open a Chanel boutique for her sister and died in the worldwide Spanish flu epidemic. News of her May 2, 1921, death in Buenos Aires eventually reached her sister in France and her husband in Ontario. A 2011 book on Coco Chanel revealed that, according to Antoinette's death certificate, she died at her own hand.

Oscar and Caroline Fleming, like many of their friends, lost a great deal in the crash of 1929. The Flemings retired but spent less and less time at Ridgewood. Oscar had most of the farm buildings removed, and mortgaged the property to Charles Cadwell, of Windsor Sand & Gravel, who began extracting gravel from the river lands. Fleming also leased 105 acres to Cass Hough, who established a private airport.

When Oscar died in 1944, the property was already up for sale. In 1945, as Tom Sandy was walking up Hamilton Street, he passed lawyer Frank Donnelly, who told him he had a piece of property for sale if he was interested. Turns out Tom – a Goderich construction business owner, mechanic extraordinaire, and inventor of mobile gravel crushers – was interested.

He and his family's hard work brought the estate back from succumbing to time and emptiness. His daughter, Beulah Homan, immortalized the property in her fictional trilogy about The Ridge, and his grandson and present owner Keith Homan has continued to restore and renovate the 187-year-old property. His 'History of The Ridge' documents beautifully the life and times of The Ridge, its owners, and the role his family, the Sandys and Homans, have played in the property's cycle of revival and development. ■

Jodi Jerome is a writer, historian and heritage consultant who enjoys finding the stories people have forgotten about the places they live, and making the local landscape come alive for those who live and visit there today. Contact her at jodijerome@icloud.com.

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