

"The Meyers' Silver Cave"

TOLD BY FRED. B. MEYERS TO FRED. WILLIAMS.

The recent announcement of the transfer by Mr. and Mrs. Merrill Denison of their estate of Bon Echo in Eastern Ontario to the Ontario Government has revived interest in the story of the "lost silver cave". Since family records are best in such a case, I have taken some pains to delve into the matter and endeavor to locate the truth. Jacob Walden Meyers was born on the leasehold of his father near Coxsackie, on the Hudson River, in 1777, his father being then absent securing recruits and thus avoiding share in the surrender of Burgoyne's army. Jacob married Jane Mackenzie in 1798, and their eldest son, John W. Meyers, was the man who is said to have located the alleged treasure cave. The family records state that he died in 1819, when he could not have been much more than 20.

Captain John Walden Meyers maintained during the fur season of each year trading posts at Alnwick on Rice Lake and at Stoco Lake near Tweed, where tradition has it a rock, still pointed out as a trading location, called Still House Rock, was a traders' headquarters. My grandfather, Tobias Bleecker, and his brother, George, both acted as agents at these points, as did probably also other grandchildren. From Stoco Lake through the Bridgewater route it would be a short distance to Michinog Lake and the Rideau and Ottawa Rivers to the Cobalt country, and it is very possible that there was a portage and trail into the north, which has since proved a storehouse of silver.

Family tradition has it that John W. Meyers, the supposed discoverer of the cave of silver, had his curiosity aroused by silver displayed by some of the Indians trading at Meyers' stores, and that in the Fall of 1819, two years before his grandfather's death, John left for a trip with these Indians. Where they went is a mystery; they were absent a long time; they returned to Michinog where there was a quarrel between Meyers and his Indian guides. The story goes that John had some silver in his canoe which he was bringing down to "show the folks," and was attacked by the Indians who did not want their secret known. In the fight all the canoes were upset and the occupants thrown into the water. What became of the Indians is unknown. John Meyers managed to get ashore and in time reached the home of one Van Tassel, where he arrived in a very exhausted condition. He was taken in and cared for, but the exposure had done its work and John succumbed to pneu-

monia. But before he died he told them the story of the silver mine which he had seen.

Whether this be true or not cannot be verified, but it is certain that for years descendants of this Van Tassel family, who lived near Buffalo, N.Y. used to come and explore the rocks and country north of Michinog Lake, claiming that a map had been drawn by the dying visitor and kept in their family. Finally they abandoned the search being convinced that the landmarks had been removed, perhaps designedly by Indians.

Another story has it that it was to a family named Asseltine that Meyers went and that they had the map and the secret. There is also a story that John really managed to reach the Jacob Meyers farm on the front of Sidney and died there; but against that is the certainty that there is no record of any of the Meyers searching for the cave or mine.

Some people in writing about this mystery have claimed that silver spoons in the Meyers family were made out of silver got from this secret mine. That is absurd. These spoons bear the British hall mark of the period and were quite evidently purchased by the elder Meyers on one of his annual trips to Quebec, to which he travelled by raft in the Spring and where he purchased his year's supplies to bring to his upper home.

The mystery of this lost mine has lived through the generations. To the prospector of old time it was no myth; he believed the story and many a weary month was spent combing the country, but in vain. Yet the geological formation of the country gives ground for belief that the story is quite possibly true. Gold, silver and lead have long since been mined in the district. A few miles north of Madoc is the old Richardson gold mine and east of it is a silver mine which was operating not so long ago, and may be yet. Some time in the 60's a gang of counterfeiters are said to have operated in caves in the Michinog district. Perhaps they got their lead from part of the country over which John Meyers was taken. There is no doubt that the country was a busy section in the early days. Tobias Bleecker, grandson of Captain John W. Meyers, had large timber limits in Elzevir Township and used to hunt there in his later life. The late Samuel Dandford of Madoc, told me he had seen as many as seven lumber sleighs laden with furs go by his Madoc home bound for New York, and I have among my treasures a buck horn from one of the Elzevir deer, shot by Tobias or William Bleecker, his son.

Silver Cache Legend Part of Family Lore

By GRACE MAIDENS BENNETT

SINCE 1788 the story of Meyers' and Bleecker's Cave has become a Hastings County legend. It is a legend of lost wealth, a legend of a fabulous silver deposit, snatched at hopefully by white men and even within their grasp for a short time, but which completely disappeared.

This cave is not a figment of the imagination of some old yarn-spinner. The story has been a thrilling part of our family life for many a year, and because its members were prominent in trying to secure the mine for the white man, I have been fortunate enough to learn the facts, set out here in detail for the first time.

My pioneer ancestor, Captain John Walden Meyers was one of the most active of the United Empire Loyalist group who settled the Bay of Quinte district. The old Dutch Captain—a former British secret agent and brilliant partisan of the Loyalist cause—was largely responsible for guiding, aiding, and paving the way for the Loyalist movement into Upper Canada (Ontario). He finally settled on the banks of a swift-flowing river which he named "Meyers Creek," where Belleville now stands.

Meyers was a powerful man, huge of frame, fiery of hair and temper, but far-sighted and fair in his dealings. He was a natural leader for the settlement. He saw the uselessness of the trip to the King's Mills at Kingston to get grain ground, which involved the back-breaking task of carrying it in sacks over the Indian trails. With great difficulty he constructed the first grist and saw mills. His projects were to grow and flourish. Trade was needed and money scarce so he became the chief trader and barterer of the district. The Indians saw in him a leader and he became their friend and knew their language and customs well. They patronized the trading post, bringing in the much sought-after furs. From his brickyard he built the first all-brick house in Upper Canada at Meyers' Creek: a colonial centre-hall type of structure, its welcoming doors stood open to all travellers.

Meyers and his sons took many surveying trips under the Indians' guidance. His imagination was often stirred by the glimpses of silver shown by the Indians around the trading post. During this period his sons were making many journeys by canoe into the surrounding wilderness, contacting new groups of Indians for further trade with the post. Furs were the principal item they brought in exchange for dry goods, hardware, and other articles. The only answer that Meyers was ever able to receive to explain the presence of these silver objects came in a heavily-laden canoe that glided down the Salmon River out of the mist early one summer morning, weighed down by a pile of silver ore. An Indian guide sat silently erect in the stern, and in the bow lay a

fever-ridden young man. The canoe edged its way over to the shore, and Captain Meyers, waiting at an appointed spot, lifted his stricken son up onto the bank. The boy died in his father's arms leaving only two clues — the canoe with its amazing cargo and a faint whisper that he had left a hatchet in the crotch of a certain oak tree in the area he had been surveying. The Indian guide would not talk, and Captain John never found the answer.

Two of the pioneering families of the Bay of Quinte had become united by marriage when Squire Bleecker, the founder of Trenton, married Captain Meyers' daughter. The two families continued the quest for the silver, and around 1850, a son of the Squire, John Bleecker, became the next connecting link in this mystery. Bleecker became the particular friend of two Indians. One time when out hunting, they asked him to follow them. Bleecker, always on the alert for any clues to the missing cave, readily agreed. They led him for many miles through the bush. At last they halted and blindfolded him. As they went along Bleecker listened carefully for any wood sounds that might give away his direction. Soon the small party stopped and the blindfold was removed. The Indians motioned him forward, and he found himself at the entrance to a cave. Brush and the wilderness seemed to be closing in from all sides. He stood in a very small space, and gazed open-mouthed at what he later described to the author's grandparents as the most amazing sight he had ever seen in his life. The cavern seemed alive with small shimmering icicles, as the light shone in on jagged streaks of pure silver bared to view in the rock. He fell on his knees and crawled part way in to catch a better glimpse of the long-sought treasure. The cave seemed to shelve down and back. He had a belief that if he left something behind he could return, so, pretending to slip, he dropped his hunting-knife and it clattered into a crevice beyond reach. He could hear his knife falling down from tier to tier with an echo. The Indians hauled him back and out and he could tell by their look they surmised the meaning of his actions.

As a boy, Bleecker had lived in that district, then a complete wilderness, and he knew the bush better than the Indians supposed. At that time my grandparents were living on the Marmora Road, near Stirling, and it was common knowledge to them that Bleecker was in the habit of coming back twice a year in the summertime to take out the silver. They told how he would secretly leave his house near Trenton, carrying an empty sack and pistol. Like a phantom he would appear at their farm and seemed to disappear just as quickly.

Stopping-houses were scarce on the lonely roads in those days, the farms few; it is known that he would not walk toward Marmora and used to stop at a settler's cabin where the fare was lowly but the host trustworthy. Before daybreak the next morning he would be away. He set off into the wilderness and returned, very weary from bush travel, but with a sack heavy with silver ore. Again Bleecker stayed at the cabin, sleeping on the floor with his sack by his side and his pistol in readiness. Later on, he would take a trip to Watertown, New York, and it appears that he disposed of the ore there. It was always known that he was fairly well to do.

Bleecker never disclosed to his family the mysterious source of his wealth. Aging, he was taken ill; on his deathbed he tried to tell his son the whereabouts of the mine. The son could not make out his incoherent words. Neither could he make head nor tail of a pencilled map, and thus the secret was lost again.

The final episode of this mystery took place over 50 years ago in the then thriving town of Havelock, where my father, John Maidens, was keeping a large general store and bakery. It was late in December and amid an early snowfall the store was gay with Christmas decorations and displays. On a Saturday afternoon an Indian by the name of Comego came into the store for provisions.

That night the store was unusually crowded with brisk trading. Suddenly there was a great commotion outside, the door flew violently open and in bounded Comego, knife in hand, with

three drunken rowdies after him. There were screams from the women as they scurried and tripped trying to find cover; Mother hustled them into her parlor, while the men scattered for the best vantage points. Comego yelled to the storekeeper for protection as he dodged the brutal blows directed by the enraged men. Pandemonium broke loose in among the displays and the chase finally ended up circling round and round the big box stove in the middle of the floor. The stove pipes came crashing down with soot and sparks flying in all directions before Father could get out from behind the counter.

John Maidens was a well-built man of over six feet and knew how to use his fists. He alone moved in to the Indian's assistance. By this time Comego had been knocked to the floor and kicked, but now managed to crawl in behind the counter.

With shouts of fury, the three lumberjacks made a lunge toward the storekeeper. The first found himself hurled back by a terrific blow and landed against a sugar barrel. Seeing their companion knocked out, the other two drew back. With the assistance of some of the onlookers the three were finally put out.

Fire was the next shout of alarm. The quick work of a bucket brigade held it in check until the hot pipes could be replaced. By this time Comego had been carried into the kitchen. There being no doctor in the village, John Maidens dressed his injuries. Knowing that if Comego left the store that night, he would be caught and killed, it was decided that he should remain there. Next morning, the storekeeper got out the horse and buggy and drove Comego out of the village and over the north hill. Before he took his departure, the Indian stood by the buggy and studied John Maidens for a long time. Finally he spoke: "You save my life; I take you to Bleecker's Cave in the spring." And silently he disappeared into the bush.

Time passed and spring came, then summer, but Comego was never seen or heard of again by John Maidens. Inquiries eventually disclosed that Comego had met his end by drowning while running the logs that spring.

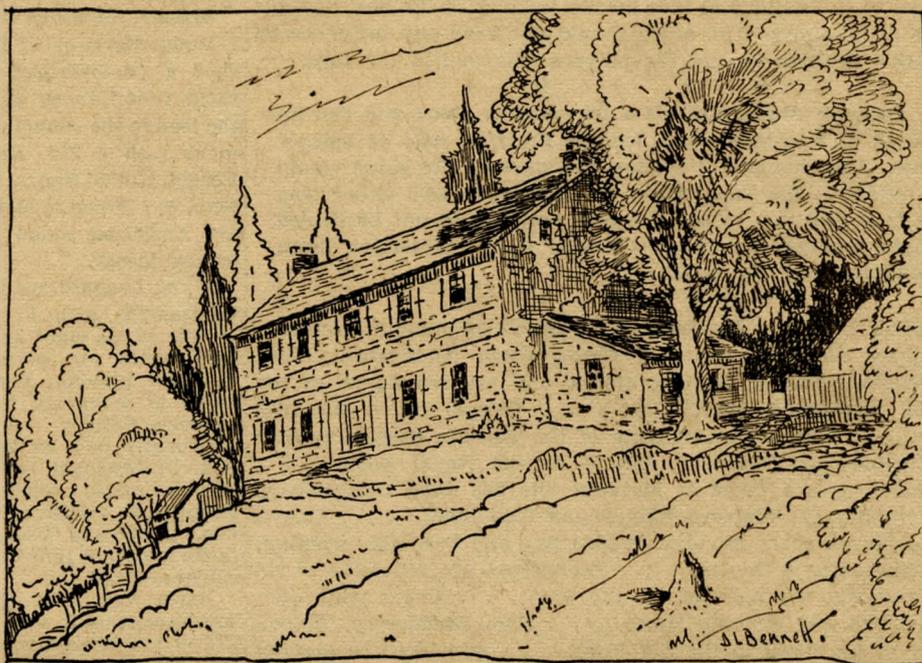
Here, then, are the historical facts of the story of an elusive mineral wealth. The fame of Bleecker's Cave and Meyers' Cave has, down through the years, spread for miles around. Hundreds of hopeful adventurers have tried to find it. I personally know that a great deal of time and money has been spent by geologists and various prominent people in fruitless ventures, lured on by the possibilities of tremendous hidden wealth. I am aware that near Actinolite, a large cave there has been called Meyers' Cave after the legend, but has no connection with any silver finds.

Now, within the last year, comes the announcement from the Royal Ontario Museum of Archaeology of the discovery and explorations of the serpent mounds on the north shores of Rice Lake. Within these ancient Indian effigy burial mounds has been discovered a storehouse of ancient relics, but what was most noteworthy as a connecting link with the Indians' possession of silver in later years is the fact that among the objects were ornaments of silver which included silver bead necklaces, and a silver pan pipe which is truly exciting, being the first silver object to be found in a prehistoric grave in Canada. Could it be possible that Indians in Ontario were making use of silver from their own immediate source, accessible at ground level, rather than obtaining it through trading with far-flung tribes as far south as Mexico, as supposed by the archaeologists working upon the explorations?

Is there also in the family records any other important reference to Squire Bleecker and Captain Meyers' association with the Mississauga Indians at Rice Lake? Records show that Meyers' trading posts extended to Rice and Stoco Lakes; also that Squire Bleecker was the Indian agent for the British Government over an area from the Trent River (Trenton) to Toronto. . . .

Can this elusive silver deposit ever be rediscovered? Young Canada already has its old mysteries.

Mrs. Bennett is a resident of Newcastle, Ont.



Meyers House, Meyers Creek, (Belleville, Ont.), 1794.

There's a cave in the hills...

by George Burrett

AN OLD story of the discovery of a high grade silver find, its loss and a search that has gone on for a century and a half add up to the mystery of Bleecker's Cave.

Dozens of stories have grown up around the facts of the case to make it a legend in the finest tradition of lost bonanzas. It has all the elements — mystery, a death-bed disclosure and Indians in wilderness setting.

The greatest skeptics are the descendants of John Bleecker, the man who "may have" found silver.

The story has found enough believers to promote a search from the lower Crowe River valley to northern Hastings County and east into Frontenac County. Oldtimers throughout the region recall the events, passed from generation to generation since the early 1800s.

Near Apsley

Apsley area residents have the silver discovery somewhere close to Methuen Lake in northern Belmont Township. They point out the Crowe River, one of the early routes from the lakeshore, passes just to the east of the lake.

But the Apsley area history is far removed from the lakeshore version.

For instance, an account in the county's history, Peterborough, Land of Shining Waters states: "In pioneer days a man by the name of Blaker mined the silver. For his work he took with him a blindfolded Indian and a suit case for carrying tools and ore."

"It is reported that the suit case and tools were found in the woods, but Blaker seems to have mysteriously disappeared."

Spelling problem

No more mysteriously than a lot of facts, including the original spelling of the name Bleecker.

In Frontenac County there is yet another story, about how Myer Cave, six miles east

of Cloyne, came by its name. Myer Cave is near a narrowing in the Mississippi River where it flows out of Marble Lake, about 12 miles north of Kaladar and many miles east of Methuen Lake.

As recalled by the late Charlie McGregor of Myer Cave, the little settlement was first called Perry's Post Office, before it was found the name duplicated another near Toronto.

Man named Myer

The search for another name led residents to suggest the most talked-of person in the community's early history, a man named Myer. He was not the settlement's most distinguished citizen, recalled Mr. McGregor, but a counterfeiter who apparently made his coin from silver he discovered with the help of Indians.

He conducted his operation in a nearby cave.

A different name, but it happens a Captain John Meyers, founder of Belleville, was the father-in-law of John Bleecker, discoverer of the silver.

Capt. Meyers was a member of the York Rangers of Toronto, gathered from an American Loyalist regiment in New York City during the revolution. Meyer's Creek, first name for the settlement which later became Belleville, was the site of his mill.

Trading post

John Bleecker, came to the area with his mother and sister from Albany, N.Y. about 1784, settling at the head of the Bay of Quinte where he established a trading post.

They were descended from an old Dutch family in New Amsterdam, which later spread up the Hudson Valley as far as Albany.

Bleecker was also a land surveyor, and moved to Trenton where he married Cath-

erine Meyer in 1787. She died only a few years later, and sometime between 1792 and 1795, he married her sister, Mary.

A surveyor and trader, John Bleecker, was in a good position to learn of precious metals in the bush country north of the front. His trading post was visited by the Mississauga and Mohawk tribes, and he spent many months each summer traveling the bush country.

Then he brought out silver after one expedition, goes one story. There is no record of how much, but it was apparently high grade ore.

Family skeptical

A great granddaughter of John Bleecker, the late Ella Bleecker, of Belleville, was among the least skeptical members of the family. She believed he may have found the silver, but it was her theory he went north along the Crowe and Madawaska rivers, up to the Ottawa to Lake Temiskaming and the fabulous Cobalt silver lode. It was the nearest find of "free" silver.

But Bleecker died of pneumonia in March, 1807, according to one record, after falling in the cold waters of a northern river. He took the secret of his find with him.

Howard Bleecker of Marmora is a descendant of the United Empire Loyalists. His grandfather, George, came to Marmora from Belleville about 1854.

The family history is not clear. But as Howard Bleecker puts it: "Apparently he found something, but where, or what . . . lord knows."

Calls it "myth"

A cousin, Dougall Bleecker of Toronto, calls the story "a myth." At least "the samples did not last until my time," says Mr. Bleecker.

According to his findings, John Bleecker died of pneu-

monia after he fell into Rawdon Creek at Stirling, where he was building a mill.

It was one of his sons who struggled into Trenton sick with fever and who, just before he died, told of a cave and silver in the "north country."

Brother looked

A brother, John, spent the rest of his life looking for it. It has grown to be a cave "filled with silver," and there have been many hunters.

Did someone recently come close to unravelling the mystery? An Apsley resident hopes so.

A. T. has pinpointed "within 200 yards" the location of a cave which an old hunting friend found many years ago near Methuen Lake. Its narrow opening led to a series of steps cut into the rock leading down to a small chamber where he found digging tools.

Thinking it to be only the work of an early prospector, the hunter did not follow up the find. Now he cannot locate the cave entrance among the rock slides and debris of the ridge.

Remains anonymous

"I understand it was a very small hole," says A. T., who wants to remain anonymous because, as he says, "I don't want the whole country following me."

Also, he does not want to "start something" until he knows for sure. The something that could be started is a general rush to stake claims.

The prospecting fraternity is mostly composed of believers.

"I have spent a lot of time hunting for it," he says. "I know within a couple of hundred yards where it is. I would sure like to see inside the cave."

He will give the ridge a thorough going over this spring, that favorite time of year for prospectors, when rocks — and cave entrances — lie exposed

