

Benjamin Devitt

Benjamin Devitt, born in 1835, was a prominent businessman and politician in the early days of Waterloo. Along with Daniel Snyder he built the Devitt-Snyder Block on King Street in 1860 and served on the Village council from 1855 until 1866 and from 1873 until 1876. For three years in the early 1880s, Devitt was the Town's mayor. He was also the region's hotel inspector and founding president of the Waterloo Musical Society.



However, Devitt's accomplishments disclose little of the man who played such a large role in Waterloo's early history. A reflection written by Devitt's grandson, E. Blake Devitt, was published in 1963 in a journal of the Waterloo Historical Society. It is through the eyes of his grandson, that Devitt the man is more fully revealed. Benjamin Devitt owned a home and estate near what is now Uptown Waterloo:

"I am convinced that despite Grandpa's crusty exterior, he was a pretty remarkable man . . .

"Grandpa was above all else, a perfectionist . . . He expected perfection in everything on his place and he was satisfied with nothing less. . . Grandpa was the only person I ever knew who, before he sent his apples to the cider mill each fall, had each apple carefully inspected. All bruised spots were cut out and every apple was halved and quartered to make sure there were no worms. . .

"His home and country estate, which dates back to 1875, was a show place of that day and was landscaped with all the skill of a modern professional landscape architect. Grandpa did it all himself – even to the planting of the trees, of which there were hundreds. . .

"In all my life I never met a man who drew a straighter line between right and wrong than Grandpa did. Nor have I met one more uncompromising toward crookedness in any form whatsoever, whether it be perpetrated by rich or poor, humble, or affluent . . . As a youngster and living practically on his place, I remember him going about his chores and he must always have had a song in his heart, for he hummed constantly as he worked. I can see him yet, with his old straw hat and veil, tending his bees, a feather in one hand to brush them off the honey combs as he lifted them out of one of the dozen or more hives he always had. . .

"His fish pond was teeming with speckled beauties and was complete in every detail, even to the spawning area he provided for them . . . We watched Grandpa feed those trout every Sunday morning (with

liver given to him by the town butcher) just as regularly as we went to Sunday school.

“During the several years that he was inspector of hotels for the township, I quite frequently went along with him on his tours of inspection. Those were leisurely horse and buggy trips that I shall never forget. I am sure that I learned more about nature and the great outdoors as we drove together through the country side, that I could have learned any other way. . .

“He also knew the location of every trout stream in the township, and always carried his fishing rod, tackle and old fishing basket along just in case . . .

“As for the work of inspecting the hotels – after the first stop it was strictly routine, for the proprietor of the first hotel we stopped at invariably warned the owner of the hotel in the next village that we were coming and of course Grandpa would find everything in apple pie order. He knew they always did this, but even he was powerless to do anything about it. He always bought a drink for everybody in every bar we visited, but never took one himself then or an any other time – to my knowledge.

“Probably my happiest and certainly my most vivid memories of this bygone era centre around the family gatherings held each New Year’s Day at Grandma and Grandpa’s home . . . we always gathered around the piano in the music room for a good old-fashioned song fest. Grandpa always sat out in the hall, with his feet up on the bog stove. He never sang a note but just hummed along. We always sang his favourite hymn, ‘We Would See Jesus’, and when we did he would hum just a little louder and sometimes we could see a tear trickle down his otherwise stern face.”

Photo courtesy of the Waterloo Public Library.