



What Happened to Port Union?

By David Bowring

Excerpted from his forthcoming book,
For Love of the Rouge.

Port Union Road recalls the village of that name and a great wharf built to handle the shipping needs of Scarborough, Markham and Pickering. But until 2005, the road name was its only existing memorial. The rail lines, first laid in 1853, are busy with GO train traffic, but the modern station, built about where the Port Union rail yards and station once stood, is named "Rouge Hills". Whence came this change?

This land would have been farms until modern times, except for the arrival in the late 1840s of one William Helliwell. Bill Helliwell was the son of an English cotton spinner who had defied a law against the emigration of this class of skilled tradesman to come first to the U.S., then to Niagara Falls, and finally to the banks of the Don River where he built a brewery in the settlement called Todmorden Mills. The brewery burned down in 1847 and Bill took his share of the family wealth and invested in land he had bought on the south side of Kingston Road, near Highland Creek. His grist mill was eventually followed by a cider mill, a chopping mill, and a hotel. Soon William Helliwell was a leading citizen of the Highland Creek and Centennial Area.

Produce from the farms in the area had to be moved to Toronto, either by the rutted paths through the woods that passed for roads in those days, or transported to the lakeshore where schooners could carry it along the north coast of Lake Ontario. In 1848, Helliwell masterminded the formation of the *Scarborough, Markham and Pickering Wharf Company*,

which built and operated a wooden wharf at the foot of the township line between Scarborough and Pickering, henceforth to be known as Port Union Rd. This wharf extended approximately two hundred and fifty feet (75 metres) southeast and was highly successful. The area continued to flourish through the 1850s with Helliwell opening the Union Hotel in 1850. The climax came when in 1856 the Grand Trunk Railway laid tracks close to the lake, crossing the Rouge by the concrete and steel bridge that carries them to this day. A shunting engine was kept at the station to help trains climb the long hill up to Scarborough Junction. In 1869, Thomas Laskey built the Stoner's Hotel, so to stay competitive, Helliwell rebuilt the Union Hotel. Near the station, a store became home to the Port Union Post Office. The population grew to about a hundred. There was a blacksmith, a cooper, a railroad contractor, and various railway employees in residence.

The building boom in nearby Toronto in the late 19th century gave rise to the unique occupation of "stone hooking." Sailing ships would drag the bottom of the lake to retrieve boulders, which were sold to companies constructing the foundations of the new buildings. Some of the rocks were taken to nearby log cribs to create breakwaters to protect the shoreline. It seemed that the cribs were slow to fill and many suspected that the same "Stone Hookers" who deposited the rocks during the day, removed them at night for resale in Toronto. It was eventually recognized that removing the rocks in the shallow waters caused erosion of the shoreline and legislation sharply curtailed the practice.

After 1856, the wharf company began to loose business to the railway. In 1895, a severe storm wrecked the dock and put the company out of business for good. The population dwindled and the hotels closed. Port Union never thrived again. The area became a quiet out-of-the-way farming community and the buildings of the former boomtown fell into decay. However, the seeds had already been sown for the future harvesting as the modern suburb of West Rouge.

In 1843, Mr. Henry Cowan, had settled on the land West of the Rouge River. He was hard working, a smart businessman, and very lucky. Five years later, he sold a small portion of his farm to the Grand Trunk Railway Company to run the tracks and build a modest station and shunting yard. Two





years after that, he sold a portion of his land between the tracks and the shoreline to William Jackson and others. Henry's son, William, acquired the land east of the Rouge, and the property north of the tracks on both sides of the river remained in Cowan family hands until 1925.

That year, Cecil White, real estate broker from Scarborough, and his associates put together Rouge Hills Development Ltd. They had a dream to create *Rouge Hills – The Venice of the North*, a summer playground with country estates, woods, hills, islands, “Venetian” boating canals, and beaches, an athletic centre of international renown, and even a famous orchestra. The dream was short lived; some streets were built and occupied before Equitable Life foreclosed on the mortgage. Yet Cecil White's grand dream remains the basis of the modern community of West Rouge.

As the post war economy warmed up, development of the area continued. In 1948, Rouge Hills Golf and Country Club Limited was formed using the Cowan barn for the clubhouse. When it wound up in 1973, the new owners wanted to demolish the clubhouse, but the Town of Pickering intervened and negotiated with them to operate the clubhouse as a community centre. In 1977, fire gutted Henry Cowan's old stone farmhouse on Rouge Hills Drive. In 1986, the structural safety of the West Rouge Community Centre was called into question. The local community urged that the clubhouse be kept, and in 1987, the City of Scarborough committed to its retention. On October 20, 1990, the newly renovated West Rouge Community Centre opened to the public. The front hall contains a preserved copy of the flier produced by Rouge Hills Limited to promote *The Venice of the North*.

The deep wetlands at the mouth of the Rouge are still home to cattails, frogs, heron, turtles and catfish. Thanks to the Rouge Park designation, this provincially significant area is safeguarded in its almost natural state. You can look from some of the streets that were built during the 1940s, down the slope onto the wild mass of bush and wetland and the road into the valley abandoned after Hurricane Hazel in 1954.

So where are the remnants of Port Union the rocky shore that was home to fishermen, shippers, and railway workers? Where are the Port Union station and marshalling yards? Is there any trace of Helliwell's great wharf?

The Rouge Hills GO station dominates the portion of the shoreline where Lawrence Avenue turns a corner to avoid plunging into the lake. Its trim, modern lines and parking lot hide the last traces of the original Grand Trunk facilities. A high chain link fence prevents you from crossing the tracks to reach the shoreline. North of the station a gravel road crosses the tracks, leading to a small patch of grass and trees at the edge of the lake. To the left, a private lane parallels the shore leading to a handful of older houses. To the right a billboard advertises “building for the living city - the Chesterton Beach Waterfront Reclamation project.” The illustration on the billboard shows a complete facelift of the shoreline from the outflow of the Rouge River to the mouth of Highland Creek. A road leads southward for trucks to carry loads of rock and concrete to reshape the shoreline and recreate habitat for wildlife in the area. From a viewpoint on the land being developed west of Port Union Road you can see a breakwater and infilling of stone taking shape where the wharf once protruded out into the waters. South of the station a park was created in 2005 – Port Union Common.

Beneath this triangle of land, sculpted into low knolls, lie buried some more traces of the busy little village whose name it carries. The trim grass, children's playground, neat gardens and newly planted saplings proclaim the newness of the Common. Decades from now the park will mature and, I hope, have a plaque explaining that this area was once busy downtown Port Union. There is an underpass which will eventually enable pedestrians and service vehicles to pass under the train tracks and visit the reconstructed waterfront nature preserve. Today, the passage is blocked up while the reconstruction of the shoreline is going on. In the damp tunnel I discovered a heavy piece of fence post, a foot long and deeply gouged by decades of exposure to the water and cold air. I like to think that it is a piece of the *Scarborough, Markham and Pickering Wharf*, remaining from the stormy night in 1895 when the Village of Port Union began to die.

