

# Secord story set straight by book

Practically everyone in the Niagara peninsula has heard of Laura Secord and the heroic deed she performed during the War of 1812-14 to save her country.

Niagara country is Laura Secord country. Here she lived for more than seventy years and here are located schools named after her, (in Queenston and St. Catharines), homes she lived in at Queenston and Chip-

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pawa, her burial site at Drummond Hill cemetery, and several monuments in remembrance of her.

However, Laura Secord, although a prominent figure in Canadian history, is one of the most controversial as well. Much fancy has crept into the facts surrounding her life here and particularly the events concerning her heroic deed.

Just a few days ago, there came to my desk a newly released book entitled, "Laura Secord — the legend and the Lady." It was written by Miss Ruth McKenzie, Toronto librarian and Ottawa Centennial writer, and is published by McClland and Stewart, Ltd. In this 142 page book, Miss McKenzie sets straight, once and for all, the pieces in the controversial puzzle surrounding Laura Secord's walk, using documentary evidence to back her claims. There is a chapter

on Laura's girlhood and marriage to James Secord of St. David's, her early residence there and why they moved to Queenston by 1795. Laura Ingersoll (her maiden name) was born an American in 1775 in Great Barrington, Mass. Therefore, the Americans generally regard her as a traitor.

She was not a United Empire Loyalist as her father had fought for the Americans during the Revolutionary War. He became disenchanted with life in the new Republic of the United States, and came to Canada, via Fort Niagara, to accept fire land at the invitation of Lt. Governor John Graves Simcoe.

Laura Secord's life in her Queenston home was far from carefree. For many years, she and her husband had severe financial difficulties. Her heroic action in going to the battlefield during the Battle of Queenston Heights (October 13, 1812) save her husband's life, as he had been badly wounded.

Twice their Queenston home was looted by invading American troops or Indians, and in this house she learned of the American attack planned for Col Fitzgibbon and his forces at the DeCoo outpost.

Actually, Laura did not take her cow with her as generally related in Canadian history books. Her niece, Elizabeth Secord, went with her part way. (One account claims it was her sister, not her niece), but dropped out from exhaustion. Laura went the 20 mile trek to warn Fitzgibbon, but he already knew of the impending attack through Indian scouts. (The resulting battle of Beaverdams,) June 24, 1813, between his Indian allies and the American invaders ended in a

of James, but they soon moved to Queenston where business opportunities were better since it was the northern terminus of the Niagara Portage Road. Apparently things went well for the Secords'. James was a successful merchant, they had two coloured servants, and in an old ledger of the period, the entries for the Secord account are frequently for expensive articles of dress or materials.

Indeed the whole region was prospering. Thirty years of industry had changed the landscape, for, instead of forest there were now fertile fields and orchards, and many a log house of brick or stone.

Then in 1812, war threatened the security gained with much cabin had been replaced by a perseverance and hard work.

James Secord fought in the Battle of Queenston Heights and was severely wounded and narrowly escaped death at the hands of some irresponsible soldiers as he lay helpless on the ground.

In 1813 the Americans held all the Niagara frontier from Fort Erie to Fort George, and the main British forces had retreated to Burlington, but before Fort George was evacuated, its guns spiked and its ammunition blown up, some supplies were taken to Beaver Dam and placed in the house of a Mr. de Cew, in the care of a small body of troops under Lieutenant Fitzgibbon. This daring, resourceful young soldier had been harassing the enemy for some time by making small but annoying attacks on their lines — even going so far as the outskirts of Fort George. The Americans determined to put an end to this. By this time Fitzgibbon, with his headquarters at Mr. deCew's house, had been reinforced by Captain Duliarme and about one hundred and sixty Caughnawaga Indians.

Col. Boistler was given command of a force of 630 men with artillery, dragoons and mounted infantry and on June 23rd was ordered to attack Fitzgibbon, and now comes the well-known story of Laura Secord. She overheard the American officers making their plans and as her husband was still disabled from his wound and there was no one else to give the warning, she determined to do so herself. From Shipman's Corners, now St. Catharines, the way led through thick forest. Fallen trees and swollen streams hindered her progress and fear of wild animals and perhaps the occasional unfriendly Indian increased the horror of the journey. But she went on bravely and reached the de Cew house at nightfall. The ever resourceful Fitzgibbon made full use of the Indians under his command and Col. Boerstler surrendered. That is the story that has come down through the years. But later research into historical records, both British and American, has led to the theory that Lieutenant Fitzgibbon must have been warned before Mrs. Secord could have managed to reach him. However, that does not lessen in any degree the honour due to the woman who braved such difficulties and dangers. Urged on by loyalty and devotion, she did what she believed to be her duty, regardless of physical and mental suffering.

Sometime in the 1820's James Secord was given the post of Collector of Customs in Chippawa. He died in 1841 and was buried in Drummond Hill Cemetery. That same year Mrs. Secord bought a small cottage on the bank of the Chippawa Creek. Here she spent the rest of her long life.

Her husband's pension ceased after his death and the Government had never rewarded her in any way for her own heroic action. She had a small private school to eke out her scanty income but life must have been difficult for her. However, when the Prince of Wales (Edward VII) was here in 1860, he discovered that her bravery had never been recognized and sent her one hundred pounds.

Laura Ingersoll Secord died in 1868 and was buried beside her husband. Years later a monument was erected at their graves and the original tombstones were removed to the vestibule of Holy Trinity Church, the church where she had worshipped so many years.