

LIFE OF LOYALIST FAMILIES – OVERCOMING HARDSHIPS AND OBSTACLES

Loyalist settlements developed in the wilderness, far from established colonies. Although many of the families had come from somewhat similar situations, they needed support in the early years to help them survive. This support came from three main sources: the native people who were already living in the area, the British government and each other.

A number of the Loyalist narratives tell of the friendliness and generosity of the native people whom they met in their new surroundings. Natives gave the Loyalists animal skins and showed them how to make clothes from them. This clothing proved to be more comfortable and durable than homespun attire, which could be scratchy and easily ruined in the forest. Mrs. Sophia Rowe described the respect and friendship between her father, Captain Thomas Anderson, and Assiginack, an Ottawa chief, as they worked together in the Indian Department at Drummond's Island for more than 30 years "shoulder to shoulder, heart and soul for the good of the Indians."

Until June of 1786, the British government provided a few basic tools, and rations of food, clothing and seeds. Accounts mention the abundance of fish and game in the forest and streams. This was augmented by food shipped in barrels from Montreal. The amounts were based on a private soldier's daily ration and consisted of flour and pork, with small portions of beef, butter and salt. Clothing consisted of shoe soles, blankets and bolts of coarse woolen cloth and linen. Seed for spring wheat, peas, corn and potatoes were also part of the government provisions. Travellers through the Loyalist settlements refer to the happiness and prosperity they observed among the settlers.

These pleasant circumstances were interrupted, in many settlements, by the winter of 1788-89. This period came to be known as the "hungry year" or the "starving time." The severe hardships had a number of causes: a poor harvest in 1788, the end of government support (on which some families might have become overly dependent), careless and inexperienced farming common in many pioneer settlements and an especially severe winter.

Henry Ruttan, whose family had settled in Adolphustown, related that his uncle had sent two Negro slaves through the heavy snow to Albany, New York (a distance of 150 miles) that winter to buy food with some money he had saved from the sale of his army commission. They were able to return safely with four bushels of corn, enough to feed a family of eight until the next harvest. The Ruttans were fortunate to own a cow, which provided them with dairy products. Records show that families also existed on roots, nuts, bark and the leaves of trees, as well as bullfrogs, small birds, various edible wild plants, even the next year's seed potatoes.

All pioneers regarded the forest as an enemy to be destroyed as quickly as possible so that they could establish their farms. Trees were chopped down with axes or killed by "girdling," a method whereby a fatal ring was chopped around the trunk of the tree. Then the trees were burned, either where they had fallen, or in windrows or piles if oxen were available to drag them into place. Huge and very dangerous bonfires reduced the trees to ashes, leaving stump-filled fields for planting crops.

Clearing the land was one of the many backbreaking or boring tasks that became a part of life for the Loyalists. To finish such work more easily and quickly, and to have fun at the same time, neighbours organized "bees," to which everyone in the surrounding area came. The men would work together to clear land or build a barn or complete some other task that may have been an

impossibility for one or two men. The women would prepare the meals and the children would have a chance to play with friends who lived a distance away. Women also had bees to make quilts or card wool or shell corn. In this way, families had a chance to visit with one another as they were working. Loyalist narratives make many references to neighbours helping each other in times of sickness, accident or childbirth, as well as gathering for weddings, funerals and church services. In this way, the community provided support, which made the difficulties and loneliness of life more bearable.

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