

# Annie's Story

## Coboconk family impacted by Industrial Revolution



The Hugill Log Cabin.

Last fall, during a conversation about the Kawartha Lakes Moments and Memories project, a suggestion was made that I get in touch with Ellie White-MacNeil, who was known for her knowledge of her family's local history. Contact was made with Ellie, and a meeting was arranged in Coboconk. We connected over our common interest in history, and details about her family's early settlement in Victoria County were shared. One of the most prominent people she spoke of was her grandmother, Annie Eleanor White, whom she's named after.

Ellie shared of her family's beginnings in England, where the industrial revolution was impacting the social and economic fabric of the land in the late 1700s and early 1800s as many previously labour-intensive tasks were becoming mechanized by steam or waterpower. Between 1815 and 1850, more than 800,000 people left England due to the scarcity of jobs caused by industrialization. Many sought new opportunities in places like Canada. Annie's grandfather, Joseph Hugill, was born in 1805 and was one of these emigrants who left looking for a better life for himself and the future of his children.

In 1844, feeling the pressures of industrial growth and seeking a fresh start, Joseph reached out to his brother-in-law, Richard Ruddock, who had emigrated with his family to Clarke Township, Durham County, Ontario in 1833. Joseph and his wife Ann Ward must have received suitable encouragement from Richard, as in 1845, they and their eight children left rural Yorkshire, England and made the long sea journey to Canada.

By 1871, the census records show William (Joseph's oldest son), his wife Tamar Graham, their children and his two brothers, living on Lots 17 and 18, Concession 9 in Somerville Township, Victoria County, on what is now Hugill Road, north-east of Coboconk.

William eked out a living on the Four Mile Lake property. He and Tamar raised five children, including Annie Eleanor, who was born in 1869. In addition to improving the farm, he acted as host and guide to wealthy visitors from Toronto (including the Pellatt's of Casa Loma fame) who came up for hunting and shooting expeditions. Ellie tells me of Annie's childhood and growing up on the farm, gathering firewood, maintaining the stove and cleaning and preparing the birds that the hunters brought back.

Suddenly, we realize we've been chatting for hours.



Annie Eleanor Hugill, 1956.

A few weeks later, I'm invited into Ellie's home, where her stories bring her family's history to life. Through old papers and photographs, I'm introduced to her grandparents, Annie and Jabez Bunting (J.B.) White. Ellie suggests they likely met at church or school, as the White's family farm neighboured the schoolhouse. The building was also used as the Methodist chapel on Sundays by itinerant preachers from Coboconk. Annie and J.B. were married on October 3, 1888, and their first son was born the next year in 1889.



Annie and JB with their children, Vivian, Elizabeth, William, David and Edward.

Edwin 'Bersie' Berson. Annie and J.B. lived with his parents on Lot 55 on Front Range Road (now 468 Baseline Road). The house still stands today. Not long after their marriage, J.B.'s father passed away, and J.B. inherited the responsibilities of the farm.

J.B. and Annie welcomed their second child, a son, Roy in 1891. Sadly, within a month many families in the area were hit by an epidemic of diphtheria. Diphtheria, a disease caused by a bacterium which affects the lungs, heart and nerves, is now incredibly rare in Canada.

Annie endured great personal loss. Both sons, Roy, age one month, and Edwin Berson, age two years, and three of Annie's siblings all died within a month. The Christmas season of 1891 would have been incredibly tragic for the household and tight-knit community.

The White family grew again with the birth of their first daughter, Sarah Elizabeth, in 1892. In 1896, Vivian Lauretta was born on March 15.



Like his father-in-law, J.B. had an entrepreneurial spirit. He not only worked with Indigenous men who sold him ginseng, which he dried and shipped to New York City, he was also involved in grain harvesting and real estate in Brandon, Manitoba, often leaving Annie to take care of the children and to manage the farm alone. To my amazement Ellie produces letters written by Annie and J.B. during this time. The letters are captivating.

Annie ran every acre of their farm in J.B.'s absence. She oversaw further farm improvements such as the "stumpers." These men came to farms, set up wooden tripods and winched the stubborn stumps out of the ground to clear it for cropping. She would watch as over the years the stump fences grew and grew, forming an impenetrable barrier as the "line fences" delineating the farms. Annie would also prepare and drive the cattle to Kinmount to ship out.



While Annie kept the farm running smoothly, the growing family was an additional source of joy and responsibility. The birth of Willie in 1899, followed by David John in 1902 and Edward Basil in 1908, meant that Annie's role as a mother only expanded. She was not just a caretaker of the farm, but a caretaker of her children, guiding them through life, teaching them the values of hard work, resilience, and perseverance, imparting the importance of the land.

In September 1905, Annie wrote to J.B. about the haying, mentioning they had already stacked 16 loads and stored additional hay for winter. She found it lonely and strange managing the farm with men working under her direction and J.B. not there. In October, she told J.B. she was busy churning and packing winter butter. There was never a still moment in the White house, whether Annie was tending to her garden, the farm, the chickens, or the children, she always made time to embroider and to quilt and always observing Sunday as a day of rest. On Sundays, she would take her children to Sunday School and spend the afternoon relaxing, always with a grateful spirit.

After the tragic drowning of their two sons Willie and David on December 18, 1913, in a skating accident on Silver Lake, J.B. didn't travel west again. One can only imagine the grief of Annie and J.B.

Together, J.B. and Annie continued working the farm and raising their surviving children Sarah, Vivian and Edward (Ed), who would later become Ellie's father.

Annie's devotion to the farm is well remembered by Ellie: "Grandma would crate the chickens up, put them onto the wagon, harness the team and drive 10 miles to Kinmount to ship the chicken out on the 2 o'clock train. It was a much shorter drive by buggy or wagon to take the milk to the train in Coboconk. She looked after the moving of the cattle from summer pasture back home to the farm for the winter."

Annie endured further heartbreak on the death of her beloved husband J.B. in 1930, aged 66. At the time of his passing, their two daughters had already left home, and only their son, Ed, remained on the farm.

In 1934, Ed married his sweetheart, Lillian 'Maud' Fielder. Ed continued the farm work with Maud's help, but his talents lay elsewhere. Meanwhile, Annie remained on the farm, happily taking on the role of caring for Ed and Maud's children and tending to the garden. Ellie remembers walking with her grandmother through the farm, "As young children, we would walk the back lane with Grandma... Grandma would sit in the shade and teach us how to make a little basket out of a basswood leaf and we would fill it with wild strawberries, then make another leaf basket ... Soon we found we were picking berries in the shade. The sun was setting, and the trees were blocking its rays. Time to head home with our treasures.

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Grandma would gather up the corners of her apron, thus making another basket of sorts. We would fill this with our tiny basswood leaf baskets brimming with berries. We knew Mom would be so happy to see our offering for dessert.”

Despite the challenges life brought, Annie remained a cornerstone of her family, and her enduring strength helped shape the lives of those around her. She passed away in 1969, aged 99, closing a chapter on a life filled with resilience, love, and immense change.

“I can easily close my eyes and see Annie, on a Sunday afternoon, sitting by the sun-filled window, gently rocking in her rocking chair twiddling her thumbs, the hint of a contented smile on her face.” Ellie White-MacNeill.

## Thank You

Ellie White- MacNeil