

John Baptist O'Dette (1863 - 1951)

John Baptiste was born on April 3, 1863 in Peterborough, the third child of Marcel and Mary. His birth was recorded in the register of St. Peters Cathedral. The family knew him by his nickname, John Bat. Little is known of his early life.

In the early 1870's, Bat used to take a can of beer to his father, Marcel, at work. He used to go to the bar and get the beer for his father at 10 cents a can. He would then carry it in an old MAPLE LEAF lard tin about 4 inches on each side, 6 inches tall with a steel handle.

When he was a boy in the 1880's, whiskey was the same price as coal oil - 25 cents a quart [gallon]. He used to relate stories about the bar, with just as many drunks as now. He would go into the bars and see a big plate of beef, cheese, and such. He told the story of one fellow who used to frequent one of the many bars of the time. At the time, whiskey was a nickel a shot. When you wanted a shot, you'd give the bartender a nickel and he would hand over the bottle and a glass. This guy used to come in with his big hands and wrap his fingers right around the top of the glass and fill right up to the top and suck off the top; all this for a little extra whiskey. When asked "Well, did the bartender say anything, Bat?" he'd just say "Oh, no!"

Bat met Isabella Shearer, the eldest daughter of John and Cath, Scottish immigrants. They were married in St. Peters Cathedral on September 24, 1883, he 20, she 18. At the same ceremony, Isabella's sister, Mary, married Ernest Lefevie. For his wedding, John bought a new pair of pants. He felt that the jacket he had was still in good enough shape for the ceremony. He was a practical man who never had to cut corners. Their first child, Vernon, was born shortly after on August 4, 1884, his godfather listed being his grandfather, Marcel. Eventually, they were to raise 14 children including a set of fraternal twins, Albert and Alberta, known as Bert.

Bat worked as a boat builder at the ENGLISH CANOE COMPANY at 162 Charlotte Street, just west of George on the north side by the little creek. They built canoes by contract and were the only supplier of canvas-covered canoes at the time. A story goes that a fellow working alongside Bat wanted to

borrow \$50 and Bat said to him "Well look Fred", he says, "I'll go home and ask my wife if I can possibly lend it." He then went home and returned later. The co-worker then asks "well, what did your wife say?" Bat replied "I'm sorry, but she won't lend it." Well, Bat never asked anyone for any advice in his whole life. It was just an excuse.

In 1899, Bat changed employers, moving to the Peterboro Canoe Co. Limited. In 1903, his son Vernon followed in his father's footsteps by becoming a canoe builder for the Canadian Canoe Co. Bat rose to the position of foreman, a position he held until 1925. In 1925 Bat started the Odette Canoe Co., also known as the Peterboro Boat Livery located by the C.P.R. bridge. He placed advertisements in the Peterborough Examiner. His employees included his sons, Albert and George, and Joseph Jones.

Bat was a very active person and an early riser. In the summer, he would get up between 4:30 and 5:00 to work on his own projects before going to work for 7:00. This was how he built his steamboat. He sold the boat for the exact sum of \$777. When asked why, he replied "I don't know. This fellow came around, he wanted the boat, and I said 'Well, it'll cost you \$777. And he bought it. "

Bat was the superintendent of the carpenters during the construction of the George Street YMCA in 1903 or 4. All the carpenters were earning \$7 a week and he was making \$28, which was tremendous at that time. They used to work 6 days a week (Monday through Saturday) but, by returning from lunch at ten minutes to one each day, the men were able to leave on Saturday night at five, one hour earlier than usual.

Bat built the house on Little Lake in 1907, at 39 Crescent Street. The doctor used to charge Bat \$6 for each child delivered at home. This annoyed Bat who felt that he was being overcharged, especially with the number of visits the doctor had to make.

Two of his sons, George and Joe, drove the family car. There used to be a crib on Crescent Street. One time, when the car was not very old, Bat accelerated while backing the car out of the driveway. He went over the crib and into the lake. Eventually, the car was pulled out. Bat got so mad that he declared "Boy, if someone would give me a hundred dollars for that car, I'd sell it!" Well, some kids had been playing nearby and had overheard this. Some guy over on Weir Street heard the story, came over, and said "Bat, is that right about you'd sell that car for a hundred dollars?" Bat said yes. The fellow gave him the hundred dollars and took the car. That was just the way he operated. In 1938, he bought a Chevy coupe and crashed it into a tree at the corner of Westcott and George. What upset him was that the car had cost him \$800.

Bat was a very dominant man, some say, an autocrat. As one person put it, he was a real dictator who should have had a country to run. His brother, Eustache (Stash as the children knew him), worked outside in a lumbercamp and used to visit the family on occasion. One time, Stash placed \$100 on the table and told the kids to go out and buy something for themselves. Bat leaned over to take the money to mete it out to the kids. Stash told him to leave it alone; it was for the kids to do with as they pleased. Bat enjoyed speaking French whenever he could. He was also a member in good standing at many of the mens' clubs in Peterborough.

In his later years, when he couldn't drive, he'd still buy a new car. One time he bought a small English model, a blue Hillman Minx. He would say to whomever was nearby "I want to go and get an ice cream tonight - you drive me!"

You never said that you were busy, had a date or anything of the sort - you just came and said "What time?" and went. Bat enjoyed his food, and ice cream was his favourite. In his later years, despite his failing health, he was the first person to sit at the table; whoever was preparing the meal always felt rushed.

Despite his domineering disposition, he was a fair and compassionate man. During the depression of the 30's, he allowed his granddaughter Margaret and her husband, Joe Collins, to live in his house rent free, saying "Kid, you have

a better use for the money." Kid was his pet name for Marg.

Bat died quietly in his sleep at home on March 12, 1951 at the age of 88.

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