



## Museum Musings

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### A Prized Possession of the Pastorate – The Minister’s Bearskin Coat



**Al Clarkson, Museum Site Liaison, in  
Rev. William A. Williams’ bearskin fur coat**



**Rev. and Mrs. William and Annie Williams  
on their 50<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary, 1962**

Credit: Garry Williams

From the early 19<sup>th</sup> through to the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century in Canada, there was a gift (other perhaps than a *purse* [of money] ) that revealed the high esteem in which a congregation regarded its minister. A bearskin coat was one that cost the congregation a considerable expense. Recently, the Museum has been delighted to receive for its collection its first bearskin coat. This coat (black bear) was presented to the Rev. William Arman Williams (1880-1967), a Presbyterian minister born in Wales. He was a graduate of Presbyterian Bala College, Wales, was ordained in 1913, and served the church in Wales until he immigrated to the United States in 1921. He immigrated to Bangor, Pennsylvania and served there from 1921 to 1926. He later served briefly in Oxford, Iowa from 1926 to 1927. (*Acts and Proceedings, 1968*, pg. 577) He then moved to Ontario, transferred into The Presbyterian Church in Canada, and served the pastoral charge that was comprised of Knox Presbyterian Church, Cranbrook and Knox Presbyterian Church, Ethel. Rev. Williams served the charge from 1927 through the entirety of the Great Depression until he was called in 1939 to serve the pastoral charge of Valetta (Ont.) and New St. Andrew’s, Dover Township in the milder climate of southwestern Ontario’s “banana belt”.

The coat passed to Rev. Williams' son. Ivor Williams was the Managing Editor of *The London Free Press* before moving to Regina in 1973 to become Editor of the *Regina Leader-Post* until his retirement in 1988. He also served as a contributing editor and regular columnist with *The Presbyterian Record* from 1989 through 2000 (including acting as Chair of *The Record* Committee for one year). Ivor's son, Garry, donated the bearskin coat to the Museum in Sept. 2012. He provided this background to the circumstances in which the coat had been presented to his grandfather:

*"The pastoral charge realized that its new Welsh minister would need to keep warm on his pastoral duties, so they took a collection and presented him with a new bearskin coat. He wore it while driving horse and cutter in the snow belt of Huron County when roads were impassable for travel by car."*



**Manufacturer's label of bearskin coat  
James Coristine & Co. Limited, Montreal**

*James Coristine and Co.* was founded in Montreal in 1869 by James Coristine (1837-1908) [*Coristine and Bate Family History* website]. It was a wholesale fur company and sold a wide variety of fur products. Its specialty around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was beaver fur top hats. (*Vieux Montréal* website)

In an earlier era, a bearskin coat had to be worn with extreme caution. The account below is of an incident encountered by the Rev. Dr. Robert Burns (1789-1869), minister of Knox Presbyterian Church, Toronto, and the second theology professor of Knox College, and unanimously declared Moderator of the 1845-46 Synod of the Presbyterian Church of Canada (Free Church).

This episode occurred during a winter in the late 1840s while Dr. Burns was in the course of one of his exhaustive missionary tours. On this occasion, he was visiting members of the Presbyterian Church who lived near Duntroon, Ont.

In company with a friend he [Rev. Dr. Burns] was driving thither through a snow-storm, and when at the foot of a hill near the village, the rig in which they were travelling upset and caused something to go wrong with the harness. In order to get out of this predicament and proceed on their journey, it was necessary to get a piece of rope from a pioneer's cabin which was in sight at the top of the hill. So setting out on his errand, dressed in his great bearskin coat and cap, and with huge fur gauntlets on his hands, the travelling missionary found the hill so slippery and difficult of ascent, owing to a recent thaw succeeded by keen frost, that he could not keep his feet, and so was obliged to get down on all-fours to proceed. Just at that time the woman of the house for which he was making, happened to come to the door, and through the falling snow espied the strange object coming toward them, whereupon she cried out to her husband : "Mac, get your gun! Here's a bear!" The man rushed out with the gun in his hands, and was taking sight, when he became conscious of the mistake, and burst out with a loud guffaw, and said, "Tuts, woman; why, that's Dr. Burns!" (Hunter, pgs. 237-238)



Credit: Municipality of Huron East website

**Knox Presbyterian Church, Cranbrook, Ont., ca. 1900**  
**The church as it would have looked when Rev. Williams**  
**was its minister from 1927 to 1939**  
**Congregation established in 1855; church built in 1865;**  
**brick veneered in 1888**



**Former Knox Presbyterian Church, Ethel, Ont.,**  
**2013**  
**Church built in 1927**  
**now Conservative Mennonite Church of Ontario,**  
**Ethel**

**Sources:**

Hunter, Andrew F. *A History of Simcoe County*. Vol. II. Barrie, Ont.: County Council, 1909. Printed by Warwick Brothers and Rutter, Printers, Limited, Toronto, Ont., pgs. 237-238

[http://booksnow1.scholarsportal.info/ebooks/oca2/23/historyofsimcoec00huntuoft/historyofsimcoec00huntuoft\\_djvu.txt](http://booksnow1.scholarsportal.info/ebooks/oca2/23/historyofsimcoec00huntuoft/historyofsimcoec00huntuoft_djvu.txt). Retrieved Apr. 26, 2013

*Municipality of Huron East* website. [http://www.huroneast.com/drs\\_opn/locations/Cranbrook/KnoxChurch.pdf](http://www.huroneast.com/drs_opn/locations/Cranbrook/KnoxChurch.pdf)  
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