

CULTURAL MOMENT FOR OCTOBER 7, 2024 CELEBRATING FLAX PRODUCTION IN ARTHUR

At the corner of Wellington Road 109 and Wellington Road 11, as you turn south to go to Drayton, you will cross a bridge that bears the sign "Flax Bridge." It is a reminder to us of the thriving flax industry in Arthur from 1870 to 1920.

Flax was an early cash crop in what was then Upper Canada. It was usually not fine enough to use as clothing but was very useful for rope, upholstery and feed bags. An important product as well was the linseed oil that could be pressed out and fed to cattle. The arrival of the railroad in 1871 likely helped to get the crop to the nearest flax mill, about 12 miles away in Stirton.

Flax is a labour-intensive crop. The entire plant must be pulled from the ground to preserve the length of the fibres, bundled, stoked (stood up on end) and dried in the field. At the mill, seed pods were removed, and stalks taken outside to dry further, spread out on length, and flipped after a few weeks for further drying. Machines would separate the fibres into longer lengths, which were often sent abroad for further refining.

Indigenous peoples were often involved in flax processing which paid well, sometimes up to \$2.25 per hour. The cost of growing and processing flax was often close to the market price to be earned, so it was referred to as "the gambler's crop." As paint developed as a product, the linseed oil became an important product of the process and there were times that the flax itself was burned in the fields once the seed pods were removed for oil.

The two World Wars were important factors for the flax industry in Arthur, as there was a great demand for flax linen for airplane wings. Once the cost of production exceeded market price, flax production ceased in Arthur and the two mills there closed. One drawback to flax growth is a fungus that can develop in the soil after a field is used for flax a few times. In Western Canada, flax continued to be a crop that would help break new ground, and in fact continues production there.

A detailed article on Flax Production in Arthur is printed in Volume 37 of Wellington County History, the 2024 edition of the annual publication of the Wellington County Historical Society.

Submitted by Doris Cassan, Wellington North Cultural Roundtable



Workers stacking flax at Arthur, 1908.



A camp near Arthur set up by Indigenous seasonal workers during harvest, circa 1915.