

# Strong Backs Pulled the Flax

## VINTAGE VIEWS

By Tim Mosher

*Tavistock and District Historical Society*

Of the almost 4,000 negatives in the Lemp Studio Collection housed at the Tavistock and District Historical Society, this photo is one of the very rare records of Indigenous people in Tavistock and the district.

Unfortunately, there's no specific information recorded about this image.

There is, however, a good reference in the first substantial publication on the history of Tavistock: the late Carl Seltzer's *Fact & Fantasy, The History of Tavistock & District* book (page 172) produced as a centennial project by the Tavistock Rotary Club in 1967.

Here, Seltzer recounts how there was a flax mill constructed in 1866 on the southeast corner of Woodstock and William streets and a vigorous local industry producing flax products. Flax production was labour intensive and often involved almost anyone seeking employment, but it required a strong back. Often children, teens and Indigenous people largely from the reserve near Brantford were employed in the harvest, commonly called "the pulling."

Flax plants were pulled instead of cut be-

cause it preserved the roots for the future and took full advantage of the longest fibers, which produced the best quality linen. Seltzer noted that sometimes the youngsters would place a thistle on the bottom of their bundle so the next person to pick it up would loudly protest and the foremen didn't hesitate to wield "... a wicked handful of flax over the stretched seat of your pants ..." to discourage such pranks or even to speed up the slowest young workers.

Bill Gladding's *Crossroads in Time - A Pictorial History of Tavistock* (1890-1920) book has two excellent photos (pages 56 and 57) illustrating the Tavistock flax mill and a group of 56 people in a field, with two horsedrawn wagons stacked high with bundles of flax. Twenty of the workers appear to be under the age of 14.

The Indigenous people were part of the Iroquois Confederacy comprising six nations (Mohawk, Cayuga, Onondaga, Oneida, Seneca and Tuscarora groups) who have lived here for tens of thousands of years. *Fact & Fantasy* notes that a local business man, Valentine Stock, would sponsor groups of Indigenous people from Brantford to come to the flax fields, sometimes live in huts and other times in their own camps as in this photo, and then move to the next farm as each field was cleared.

They were paid \$5 to pull flax by the acre, instead of by the day. Non-Indigenous minors were paid 25 cents a day, while the best adult pullers earned \$1 for the same amount of time. The flax gangs worked



(PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN, LEMP STUDIO COLLECTION #0061)

**An indigenous family set up camp in a local field where the men pulled flax and the women wove baskets.**

from dawn to dusk, taken to and from the fields on horsedrawn wagons. Fresh citrus fruit in the region was a rarity at the time, so Mr. Stock would sometimes treat the field workers with an orange that came from his well-stocked general store in Tavistock.

Some of the Indigenous women earned extra money by weaving baskets. Note in the photo how the father is sitting on a basket that's clearly strong enough to support his weight without collapsing. Everyone is clothed in contemporary fashions and their humble accommodations are behind.

Flax has a wide variety of uses. The book, *Country Roads, the Story of South Easthope, 1827-2000*, edited by Jim Hagarty lists 31 products made from flax! To quote (page 595), "Cereal, ropes, furniture stuffing, parachutes, linseed oil, glue, linseed soap, printing inks, paints, brake linings, stains, varnishes, concrete preservatives, fine stationery, swedish oil [sic], cigarette paper, caulking, tablecloths, patent leather, linoleum, tea towels, art gun [sic] erasers, hard board, clothing, thread, putty, feed bags, furniture, twine, bedding and hair gel." In ancient Egypt, linen made from flax was the common material to wrap mummies with.

A secondary product of flax production was tow. This is the roughest fibers of the plant, often used to make rope. The name

"tow head" is akin to "flaxen-haired" referring to white- or blond-haired people because their hair resembles the colour of tow.

**The answer to last week's History Mystery:** The question was, "What's the clue that tells you the day of the week that the (bird's eye view of eastern Tavistock, c. 1910) picture was taken?" Linda Humpfrey of Tavistock was the first of a dozen people to respond with the correct answer; Monday because the laundry lines were full. This is largely a western Christian tradition that was popular before washing machines became widespread because doing laundry was a time-consuming, laborious job that housewives typically began on Mondays and finished on Tuesdays. Then came the starching and ironing. By getting an early start, it helped to make sure that the family had clean clothes set aside for the following Sunday, the day of rest.

**This week's History Mystery:** What caused the collapse of the flax industry in Tavistock and the district post World War II? This question is open to readers under the age of 19. Send your answer with your first and last name, the name of your community or rural route number and your age to [tim\\_mosher@hotmail.com](mailto:tim_mosher@hotmail.com). Whoever sends the first correct answer will have this information published in the next edition.

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