

# Raising the rafters was a dangerous business



## VINTAGE VIEWS

By Tim Mosher

*Tavistock and District Historical Society*

Barn raising was a community affair in early Ontario where sometimes many dozens of entire families would gather at a neighbour's farm to build a full-sized barn in a day or two without steam power or electricity. The men were skilled carpenters who braved the heights; the women prepared substantial meals for all; the teens emulated their parents; the children delighted in each other's company and the farm's animals.

Hard hats, steel-toed boots and safety harnesses were unheard of, so injuries and the occasional death would occur on site. Two such accidents occurred at one barn raising in East Zorra Township, as reported in one long paragraph with a very small title in the July 21, 1898, Tavistock Gazette.

### Two Accidents.

The raising of Mr. Robert Murry's large new barn at his farm on the 13th con., East Zorra, near this village, occurred yesterday and was the occasion of two accidents, both of which narrowly escaped being fatal.

About ten o'clock in the forenoon while one of the bents was being raised a pike-pole became loose and fell, striking Mr. Murray upon his head. He fell unconscious to the floor, and it was at first thought he was dead. Dr. Steele was at once sent for and found that the skull was not broken, and he left the patient much improved.

Half an hour afterwards Louis Roi lost his balance while working at the top, and fell a distance of 16 feet to the floor. In his passage down his head struck a beam and he fell on his head on the floor. He also was picked up for dead and was carried outside of the barn to the grass where the Dr. attended to his injuries, and he was taken home in the afternoon.

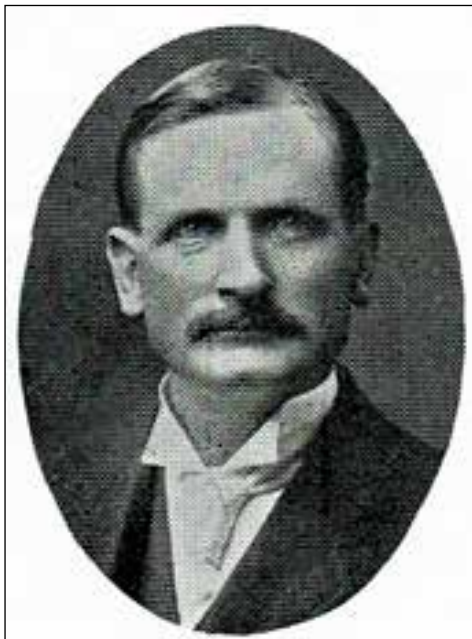
At this writing (3 o'clock, p.m.) he is still unconscious although there is every reason to hope he will recover.

There was no racing of "sides" at this raising, both mishaps being the result of accident.

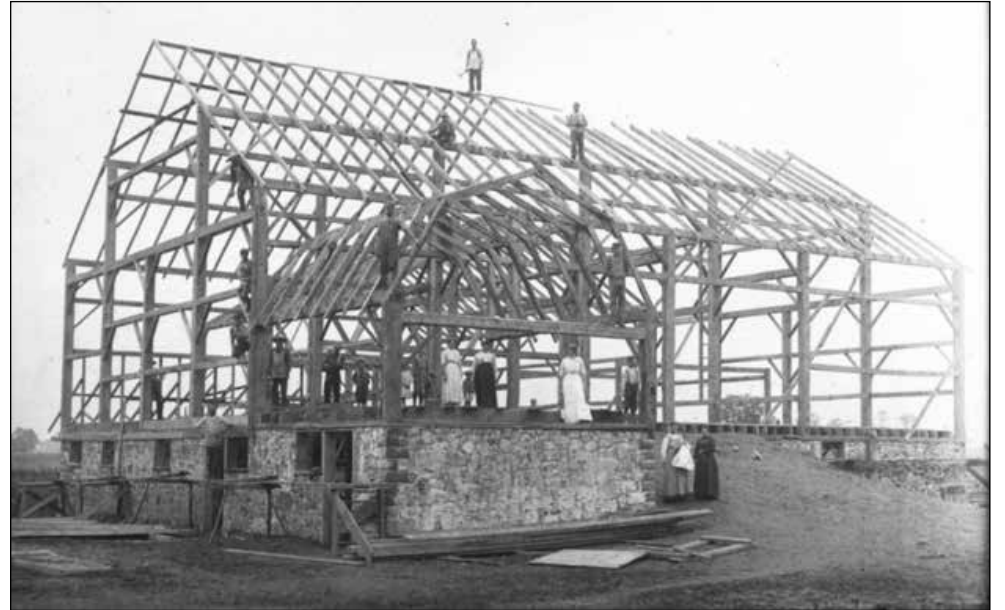
There are still many bank barns in southern Ontario, though some have succumbed to fires, tornadoes, were demolished to rebuild modern barns, or for new subdivisions. So, when you see these century-old structures, remember the blood, sweat and sometimes tears that went into building them. They really are a rustic artform of days gone by.

**The last History Mystery:** The question was, "What was the ongoing technical problem that bedeviled photographers – amateur and professional alike – when taking photos of pets, babies and toddlers that lasted until about the 1960s?" The first correct answer was "It would be hard to get pets and babies to stay still and to hold a pose long enough to expose the film without blurring" until faster shutter speeds became widespread, provided by Trudie Julien, Lagorce, France. Chouette!

**This week's History Mystery:** How were the workers "paid" for their labour helping to raise barns? The first reader to send the correct answer to me at [tim\\_mosher@hotmail.com](mailto:tim_mosher@hotmail.com) will have their name and rural route number or name of their community published in the next Vintage Views article.

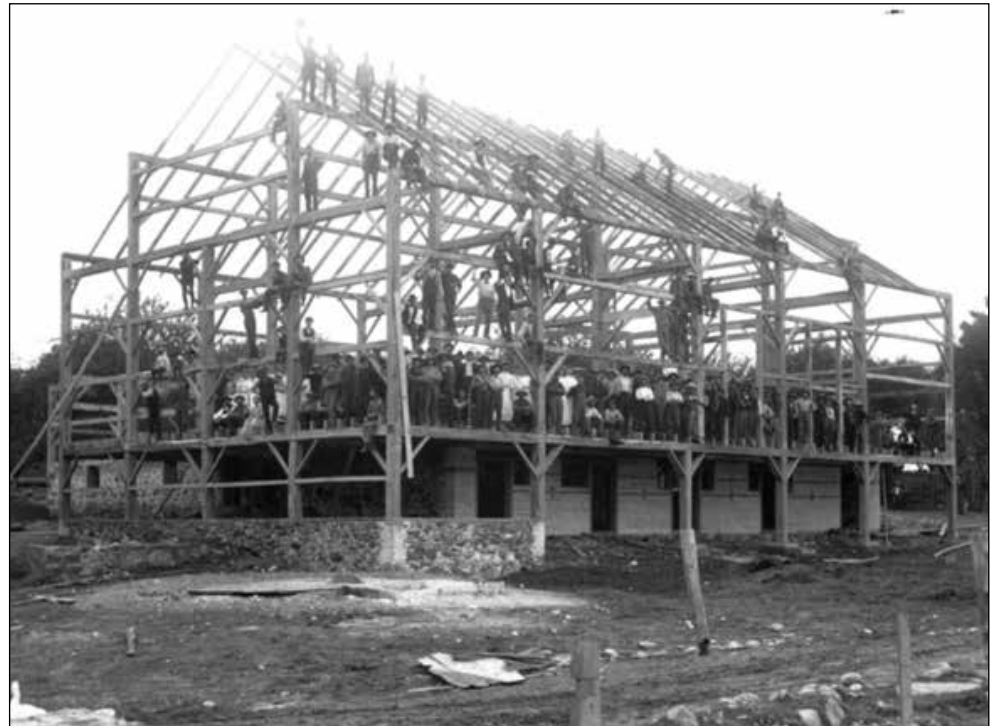


Dr. Michael Steele (1860-1946) attended to the two injured men; they both recovered. Dr. Steele had a remarkable life. His parents survived a shipwreck immigrating to Canada, he practised medicine in Tavistock for 34 years, was MP for South Perth (1911-1921) and finished his career as a judge of juvenile court.



(THE PHOTOGRAPHER IS NOT KNOWN, CIRCA 1895)

This unknown local bank barn is so named because of the earthen ramp or bank built up to the main floor. Also known as basement barns as the under storey was exposed, this one has a gambrel roof extension. The man standing on the ridge beam, top, clearly has no fear of heights.



(THE PHOTOGRAPHER IS NOT KNOWN, CIRCA 1895)

About 10 women, three children, 108 men and a duck posed for this barn raising at lot 24, Concession 5 in South Easthope Township. Barn raising was a warm-weather activity but shorts and lightweight, single layer clothing were many decades away. The milliners and haberdasheries (hat shops for women and men respectively) did great business in those days though.



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