

IF THESE WALLS COULD TALK...

KNARSBORO HALL IS A LANDMARK PROPERTY IN MARKDALE THAT HAS SEEN IT ALL

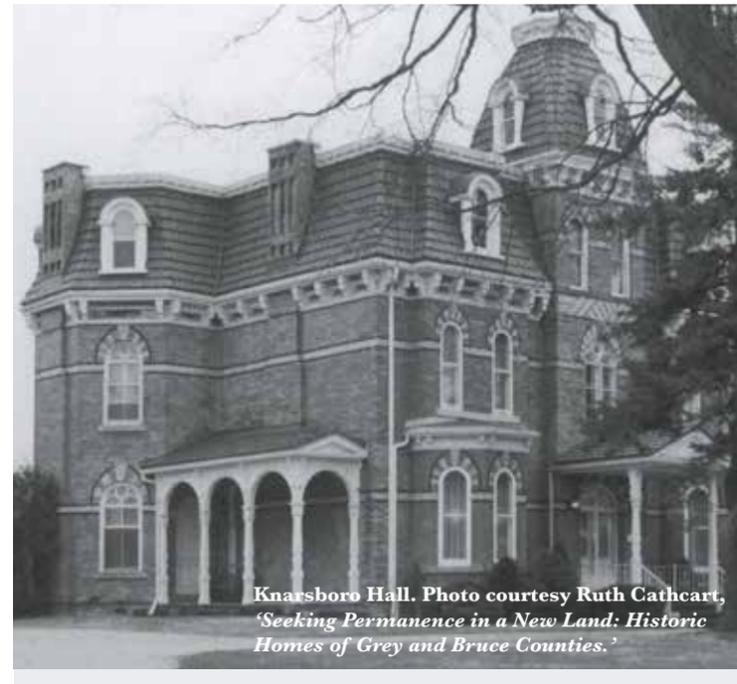
BY JODI JEROME

At 63 Main St. E., Markdale, sits a community palace. Known in the past as Knarsboro Hall and today as the May Funeral Home, it has borne witness to births, celebrations, illness, healing and death.

And it all began as an engagement present from Thomas Simpson Sproule to his intended. Born Oct. 25, 1843, one of a set of twins, in King Township, Ont., Thomas moved to a farm on Concession 16, Lot 13 in Osprey Township around age nine, with his Irish-born parents, James and Jane Sproule, and seven siblings (Mary Ann, Rebecca, Isabelle, Robert, William, John and James). He attended the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, and got his medical degree from Victoria College in Cobourg, Upper Canada, in 1868.

Dr. T.S. Sproule returned to Grey County after briefly practising medicine in Craighurst, Ont., and Galesburg, Mich. His Markdale practice was licensed in Ontario in 1870. When he moved to Markdale, Thomas lived in Alexander Rutledge's tavern, the Markdale House, and from here he rode or snowshoed to his patients. He also established a retail store, the Medical Hall, where he sold prescriptions for human patients and animals, as well as medicines, hair and beauty products, stationery supplies and school books, and housed the

by Jodi Jerome



Knarsboro Hall. Photo courtesy Ruth Cathcart, 'Seeking Permanence in a New Land: Historic Homes of Grey and Bruce Counties.'

local Montreal Telegraph Co. office.

Thomas's quick response to his patients soon earned him the area's respect and loyalty. He looked after patients at their homes, in his office over top of his store, or at his residence at the Markdale House. When William Armstrong's eight-year-old son broke his arm while carrying a bag of bran, Thomas was called in to set the break. He was even said to have coaxed a snake out of a man's stomach using a pan of milk.

When James Sparling was pinned between a full load of logs and a tree as a result of his wagon hitting a rut, Thomas was called. James's wounds were so serious that

in Thomas's opinion it would be quite a while before he could return to work.

In 1877, Thomas expanded his role in the community. In addition to being both doctor and pharmacist, he was successfully elected a Glenelg Township councillor, serving on council from January to December 1877. He followed this victory by running as the East Grey Member of Parliament in 1878. On Sept. 17, Thomas was elected as the Conservative representative of East Grey.

His first experience as an MP – from 1878 to 1915 – was challenging as he learned the rules and ways of the House of Commons. In 1883, when debating South Grey MP Landerkin on the Weights and Measures Act, he said, "Now, I have scarcely ever spoken in House when the honourable Member for South Grey was present, that he did not get up immediately after and read me a lecture on what I should do in order to fulfil my duty. I want that honourable gentleman to understand that I do not look to him for any information as to what is my duty."

Prior to his first re-election in 1882, Thomas began to court Mary Alice Flesher, daughter of William Kingston (W.K.) Flesher, founder of the community of Flesherton. Her father had stepped down as East Grey's MP in 1878, the year Thomas began his federal political career.

As Thomas and Mary grew closer and eventually became engaged, it became apparent Thomas's days of living at the Markdale House were numbered. As a doctor, Member of Parliament and future husband, he needed a home for his future wife and family.

Cheesemaking & Cooking Classes * DIY Botanical Skincare & Medicine Making * Exceptional B&B Suite



In Warton Ontario | greenheartstudio@mac.com | www.greenheartgardens.ca |  'Green Heart Gardens on George'

In the fall of 1880, he sold the Medical Hall business to Mr. Adam Turner and started building two structures in Markdale, including a three-storey, double-bricked business block on Mill Street to house the Medical Hall store and his brother John Frederick Sproule's clothing shop, with living accommodations above.

At the same time, Thomas was beginning to build an attractive mansion on Main Street, Markdale, to bring his bride home to once they were married. He wanted to have it finished by December 1880, but construction of the beautiful house took until the spring of 1881.

He commissioned Marshall Benjamin Aylesworth (1850-1911), a new Collingwood architect, to design the house. It was Aylesworth's first commission.

Thomas's house became known, after its construction, as Knarsboro Hall. The building is said to be a small-scale model of large house in Scotland by the same name. Its architecture is not Scottish but a mix of French Second Empire, with its lovely mansard roof and elegant curved tower, the perfect symmetry of an Italianate exterior with four storeys topped by lovely roof cornices held up by elaborate roof brackets, a fairy tale central tower, and Renaissance Revival rounded arch windows, outlined in polychromatic brick design, topped with different flowers carved into each window's keystone, and a liberal use of red and white brick to accent all the features of the building's exterior.

This love letter from Dr. Thomas J. Sproule to his lovely wife-to-be featured the stained glass windows and a central tower that opened the main entrance to the sky as the staircases rose majestically from the ground floor to the fourth. The large tanks on the flat section of the mansard roof collected rainwater, moving it to ground level through a drainage system for household use. The original stables were connected to the house, so Thomas could easily access his horses to respond to community and medical emergencies.

Thomas and Mary Alice were married at Flesherton's Methodist Church on Wednesday, Sept. 7, 1881, by Rev. S.C. Philp at 7 a.m. According to the *Markdale Standard*, "The bride looked handsome, richly and artistically dressed and splendidly veiled... After the

by Jodi Jerome

usual handshaking and joy wishing were over, the party repaired to the long dining hall and did ample justice to a most sumptuous breakfast. The party then formed a procession and accompanied the happy couple to Flesherton Station, where they boarded the train for a somewhat extended bridal tour."

Knarsboro Hall hosted many entertainments and gatherings. The Sproules' Methodist faith and their belief in temperance extended from Markdale to Ottawa and attracted support from many, including U.S. President Woodrow Wilson and Queen Mary. During Thomas's years as Speaker of the House of Commons and his wife as Lady Speaker or Chatelaine, he brought forth a private member's bill abolishing the serving of alcohol at functions connected with the House of Commons. A colleague remarked, "Anyone who attended these gatherings were sober enough to make it home, unlike previous times."

Thomas and Mary Alice had only one daughter, Lillian Clarissa. She was beautiful like her mother, appearing in pageant plays like 'The Temple of Fame' in 1905, where she was the Goddess of Fame and appeared "enthroned on the centre of the stage and presented a living picture of loveliness... wearing a robe of white, fringed in gold, from which descended a long train."

Lillian Sproule married William E. Turner, son of Adam and Mary (Black) Turner, on June 8, 1909, in Knarsboro Hall at 6 a.m. in the presence of close family and friends. The parlour and downstairs rooms were decorated with apple blossoms, white lilacs and cream roses.

The bride's wedding dress was a cream lace robe over silk, with a custom veil crowned with orange blossoms. After the wedding breakfast, the bride and groom set off by train for Chicago, Denver, Colorado Springs and finally Salt Lake City, Utah, where William was employed as an electrical engineer. They lived in Salt Lake City until after 1920, when they moved back to Toronto.

The home Thomas built housed all he loved, his wife, daughter and family, including at least two grandchildren, Mary Elise and John Adam Turner.

Gracing the Hall from 1915 to 1917 was the chair he

by Jodi Jerome

received upon being made Speaker of the House in 1911. Each Speaker kept the chair from which they watched over the decorum of the House of Commons. That chair now resides in the Meaford Museum.

Upon Thomas's death at age 74 on Nov. 10, 1917, in the midst of the First World War, he was honoured by the lowering of flags to half-mast at Markdale Armouries and on Parliament Hill. In Markdale, the schools, downtown businesses and the road from the Methodist Church to the cemetery, closed for his funeral.

His family held a private service at Knarsboro Hall before a public funeral overflowed the Methodist Church at 1 p.m. After the service, a parade of 100 Orangemen led the procession from the church to the cemetery and conducted an Orange Order service after the graveside ceremony.

The members of the Loyal Orange Lodge turned out to honour the man who had been a staunch Orangeman, Sovereign Grand Master in British North America for 10 years and World President of the Orange Council for three years.

As East Grey's MP from 1878 to 1915, followed by two years as a Senator, Thomas served under seven Prime Ministers for a total of 39 years on Parliament Hill.

His wife Mary Alice was beside him in all he did, as the *Markdale Standard's* obituary noted, "Mrs. Sproule has proven herself as a superior help mate, who has always had the faculty of guiding, counselling and assisting her husband during the most critical events in both medical

and political careers, and not a 'little of the honour which has crowned the late Senator's life,' was due to efficiency of his faithful wife."

Mary Alice never remarried. She stayed with her daughter, son-in-law and grandchildren during the winters and visited Markdale and her family across Ontario in the summers.

She and her daughter sold the Hall in 1921 to C.W. Rutledge, former editor of the *Markdale Standard* newspaper. Over the years after C.W. Rutledge's death, Mrs. Rutledge rented out its rooms and apartments. The house served briefly as a hospital before Dr. R.L. Carefoot opened his hospital on George Street.

On Nov. 4, 1946, the Markdale branch of the Royal Canadian Legion bought the house. In 1966, they sold the house to Donald May, when it became too expensive to maintain.

Donald May and his wife restored it to its former beauty while making the changes needed for the first floor to function as the May Funeral Home and the upper floors to serve as the family's residence. At the present time, their son continues the family business in Markdale's legendary elegant mansion. ■

Jodi Jerome is a writer, historian and heritage consultant who enjoys finding the stories people have forgotten about the places they live, and making the local landscape come alive for those who live and visit there today. Contact her at jodijerome@icloud.com

Refresh!
Loads of homestyle goodness.
And smiles all around.

Pebbles
— FAMILY BUFFET —

519-369-9982
Mon - Sat | 11:00 - 8:00
www.pebblesrestaurant.ca
313010 Hwy. 6, Durham ON, N0G 1R0

Present this coupon to receive a 1/4 lb. of **FREE fudge**
1 per customer with purchase of meal
exp: Nov. 30/19
BGB0919