Union Hall, a symbol of rural community spirit for 150 years.

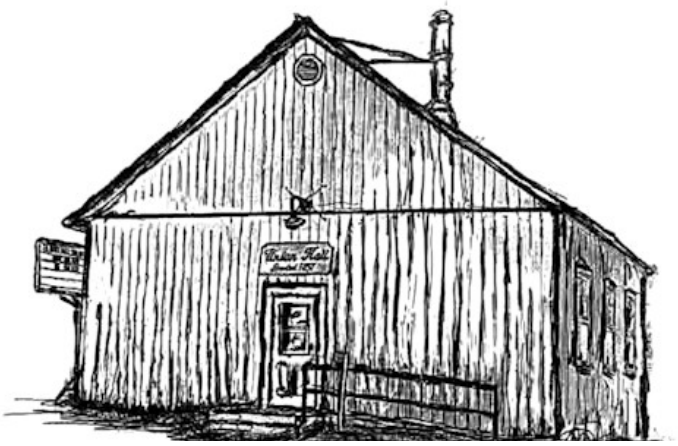
(A sightly edited version of a 2007 report)

As one of Lanark County's oldest public buildings, Union Hall is special. It is more than a building, it is a community. Local historian Claudia Smith traces its unique place in history over the past 150 years.

Union Hall has always been much more than a building. It's a community which has included:

- Union Hall School
- Union Hall String band
- Union Hall Tigers
- Old Union Hall Road
- Union Hall action committee

Original drawing done by artist Jan Mentasi



Straddling Ramsay and Lanark counties the Union Hall community has been active since pioneer days.

In 1835 Lot 16 Concession 2 of Ramsay Township was deeded to Sophia Thram. Some of this land was acquired by the directors of the Ramsay & Lanark library and in November 1856 and the Spring of 1857, a frame building was erected as a library, meeting place and a Church .... "a hall for all denominations".

Education was a priority for the early settlers. Although a log school had been built nearby in 1847, the community welcomed this new building and the newly formed "Library and Literary Association" because in 1857 many of the children in the S.S. No.3 Ramsay school were unable to read or write.

Acquiring books was important and by 1869 the number of books in the libraries of Union Hall, the school and the Sunday School totalled 415 volumes. In 1870, a new frame school was built on the south-east corner of the school site (#1742 Wolf Grove Rd.).

The hall quickly became a focal point in the community. The Sons of Temperance Society met there from the mid 1800's to the early 1900's and according to convention, ladies always sat on the right side of the room and the gentlemen on the left. The society displayed a large membership chart and had temperance motto's painted in big black letters on the walls. A sample of these might have been "Hell is populated with the victims of harmless announcements .... the bottle, the weed and cards".

Mr. Joe Dougherty held a singing school in the hall and the children learned to read music and sing four-part harmony. In the late 1800's there was a Union Hall String Band and music became an integral part of all social events.

In the 1890's, teacher Nellie Foreat encouraged social life in the Union Hall. She organized school picnics in Dunlop's Bush, a grove just west of Union Hall; "Bronco" races were run with small wiry horse riders bareback at breakneck speed down the dusty road from the hall to "Sutherland's place (905 Wolf Grove Rd). Children's excited voices rang out as they competed in tug of war, sack races or relays with eggs or potatoes. Home baking arrived by the cart full. After supper, out came the violins. Although there was no dancing allowed in the hall, couples "swung and danced amid the falling leaves outside".

In 1919, the Union Literacy Society was formed under the guidance of teacher Howard Allison. It met in the hall every second Saturday night to read plays, debate and present papers on interesting subjects. The members put together a jocular and gossipy newspaper called "The Literary Review", A resolution was passed that members "not get sore over remarks in the paper".

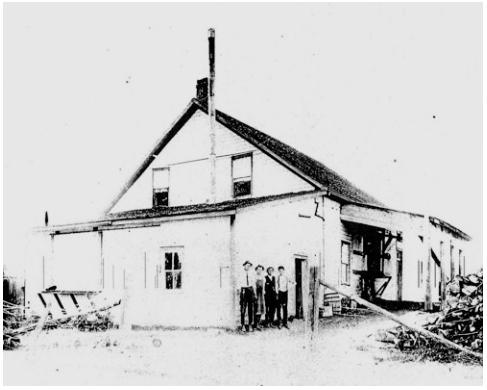
The Union Hall Tiger Baseball Club was "on the warpath" from around 1915 to the mid-1940's. Baseball was popular at community picnics and festivals and many the cow was milked in a hurry so that young ball players could get to the games. With no field lights, starting times were early to get the games in before dark. There was also a Junior Women's Institute girls ball team called the Janey Canucks.

The Union Hall Women's Institute was formed in 1932. With humour and music its members helped each other through the hard times of the depression and the grim years of World War II. They improved the hall by extending the stage and building an anti-room in which to perform plays. Historically, there had been no dancing in the hall, however the Institute members wanted to hold dances, and having saved the place from falling down asserted it was their right to do so.

In the 1940's, variety concerts "packed the hall to the doors" under the guidance of Madge Robertson who was so good at "getting them up". Horses were tied along fences in warm weather, and stabled in nearby barns in the winter. There were no babysitters, so all children were taken along. Babies were corralled into a corner of the hall to sleep away the evening as square dances were called, plays or concerts were performed and socials were enjoyed.

A new floor was laid in the 1950's to improve the dancing surface. It may have been around this time that a square grand piano was acquired. The hall's unheated environment was not suitable for a piano over the years, and in 1991, a motion was passed "to compassionately dispose" of it and it was sold.

Over the years, there were small industries in the Union Hall community. Hardwood ashes were purchased by Dunlop's haberdasheri and were boiled to make potash (2092 Wolf Grove Road). Ashes were a valuable by-product from clearing the forest and were the first thing to put cash in the pioneers' pockets. There was a pork-packing establishment in a log house near 1942 Wolf Grove Road managed by Magistrate William Stevenson. The pork was "landed and packed into barrels" made by a local cooper. Teacher John Clelland operated a grange (or co-op) at Union Hall in the 1990's. Farming families who belonged to the grange, purchased groceries in bulk and packed them, then picked them up on Saturday's. A weaver and cabinet maker also worked in the area and Love's blacksmith shop was up the road where horses were shod from 1904 to 1914 (2582 Wolf Grove Road). Extremely heavy pink-coloured cement building blocks were made from sharp sand on Henry Savages farm west of the hall (2348 Wolf Grove Road).



The Rosedale Cheese Factory was built by John Dunlop in 1879 (2096 Wolf Grove Road). The cheese was pressed into rounds weighing 10, 35 or 90 pounds. The cheeses were stored on shelves on the third floor of the building. One summer, during a lengthy heat wave, all the cheeses were ruined. Alice McIntosh remembered her grandfather saying “The grease just ran out of it and it all had to be buried”. The patrons who brought their milk to the factory had to be reimbursed. It was a financial disaster for Mr. Dunlop and the cheese maker. Later a curing room was created, and it was used to keep the cheese cool. For many years the Cheese Factory put money into the pockets of approximately 41 farm families in the area. In 1947, a new factory was built across the road and Elvia McKay converted the original building into McKay’s Garage, where he sold Supertext gas.

Traffic passing the over the years included local men doing statute labour roadwork. Eggs, hops, honey, maple syrup, potatoes, bushels of apples and hundreds of cords of stove-wood were taken into town to be sold. Wagon loads of grain were drawn into the mill at Clayton or to Herron’s Mills. Load after load of cheese boxes and blocks of ice were delivered to the cheese factory.

In 1921 the Medical Officer of Health visited the community to post quarantine signs when Diphtheria was in the district. The Daley Tea room’s wagon went by on his way to deliver farm families yearly supply of tea. On two occasions trustees arrived at the school - once in a horse and buggy and a second time in a motorcar – giving the shout “Let the children out, the war is over”, in winter sometimes the road was blocked by snow for days. The spring roads of April were so muddy, rutted and soft that horses’ shoes were sucked right off their hooves. A roadside watering trough fed by the spring at the Rosedale Cheese factory, was an additional stop for passing teams of horses on hot dusty summer days. Summertime saw families off to the Blueberry grounds behind Clayton, or trudging home with pillowcases filled with Cranberries picked at nearby Mudd Lake and Quig Lake. On one occasion crowds, raced across nearby to be present at the descent of a young woman balloonist from Almonte.

In the early 1900’s cattle and sheep were driven to buyers fairs in Clayton in the spring and fall and Joe Bays drove his racing horse, Lady home from the races in Arnprior. On summer evenings on 1929, couples passed by, heading to the Floating Bridge dance platform on the 12th Line of Lanark.

Bert Miller travelled with his thrashing machine from farm to farm. One fall he nearly lost the whole outfit in the sink hole down on the second line of Ramsey when the log bridge tipped sideways.

In 1908-or-so telephones were installed in many homes. The telephones were switched at the home of William/Roy Robertson (2101 Wolf Grove Road). During the depression many could not afford to keep their telephones; people had cars but were too poor to use them. Electricity was hooked up to the school in 1940 so it can be assumed that the hall “got hydro” at the same time so that gas lamps no longer flickered from its wall brackets.

As the years went by, usage of the Union Hall did not decline. In 1988 a new roof was put on and a septic system was laid out. An addition with a kitchen, toilets and handicapped access was built by volunteers in 1989. Charitable status was attained in 1999 and the Union Hall Centre was incorporated. dances, Halloween parties, music and talent nights as well as BBQ’s, corn roasts, pancake breakfasts and strawberry socials have kept the hall vital.

When Ontario Hydro proposed a transmission line through the community, the voices of the Union Hall Action Committee were raised in opposition – successfully.

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..... information courtesy of the Union Hall records and personal interviews .....