

## **Chapter Five: Early Years, Education, Vancouver Island**

William John Sutton, known to his family as Will, was born on 19<sup>th</sup> January 1859 in Kincardine, Ontario. He is first generation Canadian and grew up in an aspiring, wealthy, middle class, family. His father, a leading citizen in Kincardine, owned and ran a grist mill and a saw mill and they lived in a part of town named after him, Williamsburgh.

Will attended the local schools in Kincardine and later Walkerton when the family moved there in 1867. One of his teachers was a Miss Wallace and Will clearly had fond memories of her as many years later, whilst visiting Walkerton in 1903, he went to see her.<sup>1</sup>

Walkerton, with a population of 700, was less than half the size of Kincardine in 1867, but as the new county town it would have been bustling with the erection of new buildings to house county officials, new roads, and the new prison. The population would have expanded rapidly.

The Sutton's house, located in the Brant Township on the southern outskirts of Walkerton, must have been almost as grand as West House back in Dent. When Will moved to their new home in Walkerton he would have been about the same age his father was when he moved from Rigg End to West House; an interesting parallel. Will and his siblings, however, would have had a much stricter up-bringing with middle-class parents; and the experience of living in a town would have been very different than living in the country. It seems unlikely Will and his siblings would have had the same exciting adventures as those of his father and his siblings.

Not long after the move Richard Keyworth was born (1868) followed by young Fannie in 1870. As the eldest of

six children Will would, no doubt, have felt a sense of responsibility which is revealed in the family portrait of the children taken in about 1871.



*Sutton Children, c. 1871, thanks to Keith Sutton*

Will is seated with young Fannie (aged about one) sitting on his knee – he has his left arm around her in a tender hold, with his legs apart and his other hand resting on his right thigh in a statesman-like and confident pose. To his right sits little Richard Keyworth who has his face resting on his left hand, his elbow resting on Will's right thigh. Sarah Ellen and James Edward, with his hands crossed, stand to Will's left whilst Mary Louise sits in front of her sister Sarah Ellen. They are well-dressed: Young Richard Keyworth's attire reflects a similar pattern to that of his sister Sarah Ellen's dress, with lots of buttons and stripes. As with most

photographs of this era, none are smiling but looking straight at the camera. It is a formal, studio, portrait yet gives a tender glimpse into the lives of these young people.

A year or two after the photograph was taken, when he was 14 years old, Will set off to public school some 170 miles east of Walkerton; as far we know he was the only Sutton to attend such a school.

### **Trinity College School (1873-1874)**

Will would have travelled to Trinity College School, Port Hope, first by stagecoach or horseback from Walkerton to Owen Sound then by the Toronto, Grey and Bruce Railway to Toronto which had reached Owen Sound by June 1873; from Toronto he would have boarded the Grand Trunk Road to Port Hope, a line which had been running since 1856. Perhaps Will's feelings were similar to how his father felt when he left England for Canada, apprehensive yet excited but at the young age of fourteen, and on his own, Will would not have been as confident. It must have been a daunting prospect moving so far away from his family to an unfamiliar place with unfamiliar people. Will arrived at Trinity College School on 12<sup>th</sup> November 1873 and was there for nearly a year.<sup>ii</sup>

Trinity College School opened in Port Hope in 1865. It was initially intended as a preparatory school for pupils to attend Trinity College at the University of Toronto.

A reporter from the *Port Hope Times* visited the school to conduct an inspection in 1871. His report is recollected in *The School on the Hill: Trinity College School, 1865-1965*.<sup>iii</sup> As this was only two years before Will attended it will certainly reflect his time there.



*Trinity College School Port Hope, 1892, public domain*

The reporter observed the contents of the larder including, ***“some very tempting mutton and beef”*** and informs us the food is simple but excellent and the masters eat the same food as the boys. On Friday and Saturday nights,

***the boys lined up in relays of four for their weekly ablution in tanks of water heated in the shed, where the temperature in winter tested even the hardiest. But they made a joke of it and their rollicking good humour on such occasions made life miserable for ‘John’, the faithful man-of-all-work who supervised the operation.***

Football and cricket were encouraged to help make the boys happy as well as healthy. The students worked hard, very hard, getting up in summer at 6.30 a.m. to wash, dress,

attend prayers and then go to their studies to prepare for lessons. In the morning session the boys learnt poetry and verses in English, Latin or Greek. That is all before breakfast which is served at 8 a.m. Breakfast includes coffee, eggs or cold meat, bread and butter. After breakfast pupils are allowed to play until the bell rings at 9 a.m. to begin the day's work proper. The first half hour is spent on Divinity and studying the Holy Bible followed by another half hour reviewing previous grammar, thus the teacher is able to ensure the boys have understood what they have been taught before moving onto new themes. The next two hours are taken up with the Classics, Mathematics, History, Geography, Book-keeping, Latin Grammar, and German. There is a short break between 10.45 to 11 a.m. Lunch is at 12.30 and includes joints of meat, vegetables of the season, and pies and puddings. The boys are allowed to wander the grounds until studies begin again at 1.30 p.m. The afternoon sessions include Arithmetic, French, Drawing, Natural Science, Botany, or Zoology, ending at 3.45 p.m. But work does not stop here: in the evening students have to prepare and rehearse their lessons between 7.30 to 9 p.m. whilst being supervised by the master of the week.

That is some curriculum and certainly encourages the work ethic! The report concludes,

*...studiously and wisely everything that can offend the eye and ear is kept from the student; and while he can gaze at the manufactories and observe the busy crowds walking to and fro through the busy streets of Port Hope (pop. 5,000), he is wisely forbidden, except at intervals, to enter the town; but he can roam over hill and vale, through the forests and orchards, watch the white sails of sailing vessels, and hear the roar of many steamers, loading and*

*unloading in our harbour without seeing what mars beauty, or scenes of distress and vice.*

It must have been a shock for Will leaving the family home to live with lots of boys and moving from a small, rural, town to a port, although he would hardly have had the time to feel homesick. Good training for mixing, getting on with other young men, and realising there was a big wide world out there. Having read about life at the school it is easy to understand how the basics were set for the full-on life Will was going to lead.

### **Cornell (1874-1876)**

Will enrolled at Sibley College of the Mechanic Arts, Cornell, in 1874 for an M.E. (Mechanical Engineering degree). Cornell University had opened in Ithaca, New York State some six years earlier.

*I hope we have laid the foundation of an institution which shall combine practical with liberal education, which shall fit the youth of our country for the professions, the farms, the mines, the manufactories, for investigation of science, and for mastering all the practical questions of life with success and honor.* Cornell Engineering: A Tradition of Leadership and Innovation, 2009, College of Engineering, Cornell University, Ezra Cornell, 1868.

There were 410 courses offered at Cornell when it opened, 27 of these were in the mechanical arts. Course requirements for the first two years were: English Language, Literature, and Vocal Culture; French; Linear Draughting; Geometry; English Literature and Rhetoric; Experimental Mechanics; German; Trigonometry and Mensuration;<sup>iv</sup> Analytical Geometry; Chemistry; Physics; and Strength and Preservation of Materials. An interesting mix of arts and science. As a freshman Will was a member of the Mechanical

Engineering Association and was treasurer of The Philidor Chess Club.<sup>v</sup>



Sibley College, Cornell University<sup>vi</sup>

In his memorial to William John, his friend William Fleet Robertson tells us Will took “*special courses in geology and assaying at Cornell and the Columbia School of Mines.*”<sup>vii</sup> Engineering students at Cornell could study geology from when the university first opened. Reading between the lines, it looks like Will enrolled for classes in geology and developed a keen interest in the subject. His geology classes would have tapped into excitement about gold rushes: there had been one at Fraser River in 1858, another at Cariboo between 1860 and 1863, and another in the mid 1870’s in Cassiar, all in British Columbia. Perhaps this triggered Will’s interest in assaying?

Will did not complete his four year degree course: the *Cornell Era* magazine tells us, “*SUTTON ’78, is engaged in the iron business in Walkerton, Canada. He will return to the university next year.*” It is unlikely Will got involved

in “**the iron business,**” this is probably an excuse. We know that he took a short course at the Business College in Hamilton, Ontario<sup>viii</sup> which would later prove useful in his father’s lumber business.

Will then enrolled on a specialist course in assaying at the Columbia School of Mines in 1876. Assaying is testing metal or ore in laboratories to find out its ingredients and quantity, for example, of gold or silver or other precious metals. Perhaps Will (or his father) was more interested in the practical application of education rather than education for education’s sake? Or maybe Will realised after two years at Cornell that he was more interested in assaying and was forced to look elsewhere to acquire relevant training

### **Columbia School of Mines (1876-1877)**

Having gone from a small country town to a port, then to Ithaca city in New York State would not have prepared Will for his next move, to New York itself, with a population of about one million. Founded in 1864, the School of Mines was the first mining and metallurgy school in America. It became the foundation of Columbia University’s School of Engineering and Applied Science.

Will was enrolled as a ‘special’ student for the year 1876-77. According to the School, candidates for admission to special courses must not be less than eighteen years of age, yet we know that Will was still only 17 in 1876. The School also says, “*Students may be admitted to special courses of study or practice in Chemistry, Assaying, Geology, or Natural History, if it shall appear to the professors in those departments that they are qualified to pursue such studies with profit.*”<sup>ix</sup>

They clearly thought Will was qualified to pursue his studies as he completed his course in assaying in 1877. He arrived in Victoria, the capital city of British Columbia on Vancouver Island, with his father on 4<sup>th</sup> August 1877. Victoria was about the same size as Ithaca and Port Hope, with a population of about 8,000. His father would have wanted Will to move to Vancouver Island as this is where he had been setting up his lumber business but of course there had also been several gold rushes in British Columbia.<sup>x</sup>

### **First Assaying Attempts**

Will set up an assay shop in Victoria. Within a month he is advertising in *The Colonist*, remember he is 18 years old. However, there is no demand for assaying on Vancouver Island at this time, as Will pointed out in his lecture many years later:

*... I was educated for the mining profession, but when I came out here I found very little doing. I opened an assay office on Langley Street and charged \$5 an assay, but I had very few assays to make. I joined my father in the timber business, and that is how I come to know something about timber. I might say that in those days if you took out a piece of mineral and showed it to anyone to ask them what it was, they would look at you with a quizzical smile, as if they thought you were a little light in the upper story. That is a fact. (Laughter). We had only a few men like Mr. Robertson who took an active interest in the mineral resources of the Province.<sup>xi</sup>*

**ASSAYING.**

**William J. Sutton,**  
(Lately of the School of Mines, New York.)

**H**AS FITTED UP AN ASSAY FURNACE along with Chemicals and Blow-pipe Apparatus, and is prepared to assay gold and silver ores, or test for the common metals. Orders by express or post attended to. Results communicated with the utmost expedition.

RESIDENCE—Fisgard street, fourth door east of St. John's Church. ee5

*The Colonist, 9<sup>th</sup> September 1877*

### **Early Exploration**

It is clear Will did not sit around waiting for customers. He was closely connected with William Archibald Robertson at this time, his father's business partner, as they explored the island for trees for their lumber business. They had several adventures, including finding a vein of galena containing silver:

*The vein is about two feet in width with a pitch of about sixty degrees; having galena disseminated through it. It is the first good specimen of galena that has been found on the Island, and should be thoroughly investigated. Mr Sutton is of the opinion from fossils found in the vicinity that the formation belongs to the cretaceous period...<sup>xii</sup>*

Will referred to this in his lecture:

*... We have very little silver so far – that is, what we call silver-bearing ore. We have only two places where argentiferous galena has been found. I may say, in this connection, I, along with Mr. W.A. Robertson (whom I am pleased to see here this evening) were the first to find galena on Vancouver Island. It was my first experience in exploring Vancouver Island. It was up on the Koksilah*

*River. I was at that time fresh from college, and of course Mr. Robertson, being an old veteran, took the lead. We started out from Cowichan Wharf, and went over a mountainous trail, across the divide from Cowichan River Valley.*

*We had to go over hill upon hill, through brush and over logs, and I tell you I thought it was an awful trail. Here and there we blazed sign-boards, and I remembered two of them. One was “the Valley of the Shadow of Death” and the other was “Leave Hope Behind.” (Laughter.)*

*Well, we found galena on the Koksilah River, and I was so enthusiastic over this discover that I was determined to bring out a piece, and I picked out the best piece I could find. Of course, it was the heaviest, and I put it in my pack. It persisted in working down to the bottom, and rubbed against my back and, to make a long story short, I was sore for two weeks afterwards. I managed, however, to bring it down to Victoria, and assayed it.*

*I assayed it on Mr. Robertson’s forge, as I had no assay office at that time. It contained some silver. After a time a company was formed, and they called it the Stirling Mine. But I shall never forget my pack of galena, as I was sore for two weeks afterwards. (Laughter.)*

Memories can play tricks: Will’s lecture clearly suggests he and William Archibald Robertson found the galena together whereas in his diaries, William Archibald Robertson recalls that he first discovered the galena in 1865 whilst prospecting on the Koksilah River. He showed the rock in Victoria but was told it was no good. In 1877 he showed Will Sutton the outcrop and they took an example and assayed it: the first assay went over \$2, the next \$18 and

finally \$60. William Archibald took out a pre-emption on a hundred acres in the area and raised a company to develop the mine.<sup>xiii</sup>

With no demand for his assaying skills, Will was forced to enter the logging business with his father - who probably had this in mind all along - but Will never stopped thinking about assaying and opened an assay office at Cowichan Mills in 1883, running it alongside the timber trade. We return to assaying and learn more about it in chapter seven when Will takes up the position of Provincial Assayer.

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<sup>i</sup> Annie's diary, thanks to Basil Fox.

<sup>ii</sup> He left in September 1874; he is student number 289 on the school register.

<sup>iii</sup> A.H. Humble, M.A., Trinity College School, 1965.

<sup>iv</sup> Measurement.

<sup>v</sup> *The Cornellian*, 1876-77

<sup>vi</sup> <http://www.mae.cornell.edu/mae/about/upload/Sibley-History-Plus-Bios-Jan-2015-2.pdf>

<sup>vii</sup> Bulletin of the Geological Society of America, Volume 27, 1916.

<sup>viii</sup> Admission record, Michigan School of Mines. Thanks to Lindsay Hiltunen, Senior Archivist, University Archives and Copper Country Historical Collections, Van Pelt and Opie Library, Michigan Technological University.

<sup>ix</sup> Personal email from Jocelyn K. Wilk, Associate University Archivist, 22<sup>nd</sup> January 2015.

<sup>x</sup> British Columbia joined the Confederation of Canada in 1871 with the promise of an extension of the transcontinental railway (Canadian Pacific) but this was not realised until the mid-1880's.

<sup>xi</sup> 'Vancouver and its Resources', reported in *The Colonist*, 15<sup>th</sup> February 1903

<sup>xii</sup> 9<sup>th</sup> October 1877 *The Colonist*.

<sup>xiii</sup> Thanks to Kathryn and Doreen Kerby who are editing the memoirs of William Archibald Robertson which are held at the British Columbia Archives, Victoria.