

Mary Williams Trout: Diaries of a Small Town Lady

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Mary (Williams) Trout—her diaries chronicle small town life and development in Meaford, Ontario. Photo courtesy the Meaford Museum.

Mary Williams Trout: Diaries of a Small Town Lady by Trevor Parsons, Archives Digital Project Assistant

The compelling story of a small town lady, Mary Williams Trout (1847-1922) from the Town of Meaford, on the shore of Georgian Bay, is told in twenty-six of her personal diaries, housed at the Grey County Archives. The diaries have also been scanned, transcribed, and posted online at the Grey Roots website (www.greyroots.com/troutdiaries). The earliest journal dates from the year of Confederation, 1867, and following journals document Mary's life through her marriage, the birth of her children, through the First World War and up to two years before her death in 1922.

Mary Amanda Williams was born 18

October 1847 on a farm in St. Vincent Township, the eastern part of the present-day Municipality of Meaford. Her parents, John Williams and Selina Williams (nee Brewster), were amongst the first settlers of this portion of the Queen's Bush, settling on lot 14, concession 9 in 1838, just three years after Charles Rankin had finished surveying the land. John Williams was the first Clerk and Treasurer of St. Vincent. Selina Williams was a direct descendant of William Brewster (1566 - 1644), a religious and spiritual leader for the Pilgrims who sailed on the Mayflower. With a politically active father and a long-standing family tradition of faith and religion, the foundation was laid for Mary's lifelong

Grey County Archives

Grey Roots Museum & Archives

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<www.greyroots.com>

Please call our visit our website
for facility and archives hours.

The archival holdings at Grey Roots
are an extensive assemblage of
municipal and private collections
covering the history of Grey County.

involvement in community and religious affairs.

On 18 October 1869, her 22nd birthday, Mary was married to James Trout (1839 - 1906). James was the son of William Trout, millwright and one of St. Vincent's first elected councillors, and Catherine Trout (nee MacKinnon). William Trout operated a sawmill on the Bighead River, southwest of Meaford, which employed the famous environmentalist John Muir from 1864 - 1866.¹ The remains of this mill, which was destroyed by fire in 1867, can still be seen while hiking the Trout Hollow Trail that runs from Meaford, along the Bighead River to the Riverside Community Centre. At this time, James helped out on the family farm during the summer months and worked as a salesman during the winter.

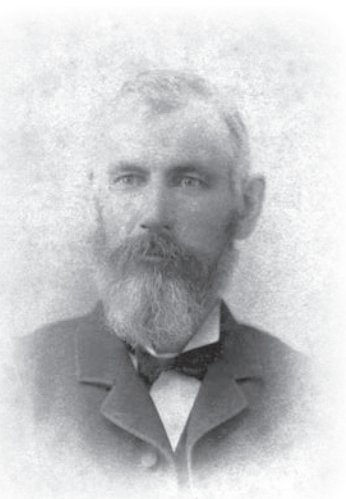
Mary was a schoolteacher at the time of her marriage, but had to relinquish her position, as she was to focus her attention on housekeeping and farm work. James had purchased the back half of his family's farm with money he made as a salesman, and the home was well established when Mary moved in. In 1870, Mary gave birth to her first child, William Ernest, adding childcare to her list of duties around the farm. In 1875, with the arrival of their second child, Kathleen, the couple moved to a larger house in the newly designated Town of Meaford, where James

Right: James Trout—a moneylender whose loans contributed to the growth and development of Meaford, Ontario. Photo courtesy the Meaford Museum.

entered into business with his brother-in-law, Charles Jay. Until 1893, James and Charles were in the business of money lending, insurance, and real estate. As moneylenders they offered financial assistance to many citizens of Meaford and surrounding area, contributing to the further development of farms, businesses, and factories.

Mary was very active in her community, regularly attending prayer meetings, business meetings, picnics and "socials." It was common for her to be out in the community visiting, shopping, or helping James with business. Most days she would eat at least one meal at a neighbour's house or serve an extra plate for a visitor. Often the people with whom she socialized were prominent politicians and businessmen. She also taught music lessons and Sunday school classes. James and their son, Will, spoke often at prayer meetings, sometimes taking a leading role.

On 7 February 1879, disaster struck when Kathleen, James's and Mary's only daughter, died of diphtheria at the age of four. Mary's devastation at this event was



longstanding, as she noted the anniversary every year. On 7 February 1920, she writes "Kathleen gone 41 years today." This would certainly not be the last time Mary dealt with death and loss.

James had endured many serious health problems throughout his life, sometimes needing to travel long distances to find doctors and treatments to help. Though the circumstances were unfortunate, these trips allowed the Trouts to travel more than most people. Through these trips they spent time in Nebraska, Arkansas, and Florida. Although their time together was rich, James developed arteriosclerosis, causing hemorrhaging in his legs, eventually leading to his passing on 16 February 1906.

Mary remained as active in the community after James's death, and even took over some of her late husband's

¹ < <http://www.ontariotrails.on.ca/trails-a-z/trout-hollow-trail/> > (accessed on 19 May 2009)

business dealings, collecting rent from tenants and overseeing the construction and maintenance of some new buildings. Her retirement years were spent much the same, with more time spent gardening, quilting, and helping friends, neighbours, and family. Mrs. Trout was well liked in her community and she had a positive effect on the lives of all she encountered. Sadly, on 28 December 1922, at 75 years of age, Mary passed away due to complications with her heart and kidneys. There is no doubt all who knew her dearly missed her.



A sample of the diaries of Mary (Williams) Trout, housed at the Grey County Archives.

The story of Mary Trout has commonalities to be shared with Canadian women of her time from coast to coast. The fact that she documented so many themes of life makes her diaries significant and appealing. Romantic and thought-provoking, the diaries are truly a wonderful account of small-town life at the beginning.
