

## The Hermit of Cedar Island, Part I

If you were to visit the Hammond Historical Museum, you might be surprised to find what looks like a petrified cigar in one of the display cases. In fact, it is a stick of "Brockway Salve" and it was used by many North country families in the 1800s. The salve was made by a very intriguing fellow by the name of Ezra Brockway. Aside from his famous salve, let's see how Cedar Island hermit, Canada, the poor house, the Patriot's War, and Napoleon Bonaparte may all relate in some way to this mysterious, yet, gifted man.

The definition of a hermit is "a person living in solitude as a religious discipline" or "any person living in solitude or seeking to do so." Ezra Brockway would certainly fit either description, at least for the latter part of his life.. Some Chippewa Bay men who knew Ezra & visited with him only knew he had been married once and had a daughter. However, it appears that he actually left his wife and more than one child to live a life as a loner on Cedar Island. While there he produced a garden and herbal healing remedies, all-the-while thinking strange worldly thoughts, mixing them with Scripture and communicating with the "spirits".

The life of Ezra Brockway began circa 1802 in Grenville, Ontario, Canada. Very little is known of his childhood days, but it is presumed he spent most of that time in that area. One of his versions in later years was that his mother was murdered in Ogdensburg and he was cast into the river, set adrift in a canoe and rescued and raised in Canada by Mrs. Bradley. (His version has not been verified to my knowledge.)

In 1835, Ezra married Agnes McDonald, a native of Scotland. They had 5 children and the first-born, Eunice, was born in Ontario. James, Ezra, Elizabeth and Agnes were all born in St. Lawrence County, probably in the Ogdensburg area. The 1840 census shows the family, with 2 children, living in Ogdensburg. Then the family, with all 5 children, appears in the 1848 Canadian census, living in Prescott, Ontario.

William Hull, a descendant of Brockway has done extensive research and found that Ezra's wife and children resided at the St. Lawrence County Poorhouse for a period during 1847. Then Ezra's wife lived there again from 1859 to 1864. One child, Eunice, died at age 17 or 18 in 1853 in Ogdensburg. Mr. Hull discovered that in 1860 three of the children were living in Waddington, as daughter Elizabeth had married Philip Sharp and took in two of her siblings. Another daughter went to live in Stockholm with Samuel Bradley and later married James.

In 1838, Ezra Brockway joined the Patriot War and fought in the Battle of the Windmill. He told of his escape from the British as the Patriots were overpowered. Ernest Cook wrote an article detailing what the men in Chippewa Bay said of that scary ordeal. "When hard-pressed by the British, Ezra threw in a quick manner, a few fence rails together into a raft and with a board for a paddle, he started to make his getaway. He knew that to be captured was probably to be shot, and he would about as soon die in an attempt to escape and so he bent every bit of his energy and his wits to get away. He paddled wildly on one side of his raft, which, with the current carried him down and across the river. The British started to pursue, shooting at him frequently.

One shot carried away three fingers on his left hand and he knew another shot might end it all. It occurred to him he might feign death and he did so in the hope his pursuers would end the chase. The plan worked and he landed on the American side, exhausted and weak from loss of blood." This story, for the most part, is true, as Ezra's escape and injuries are mentioned in newspaper articles.

The story of Ezra Brockway, AKA Sir George William Recks Bonaparte, shall continue with more details on his remedies, his life on Cedar Island, and a very unique explanation why he did not have to pay any property taxes. If anyone has further information or stories about Mr. Brockway, please send an email to [HammondHistorian@gmail.com](mailto:HammondHistorian@gmail.com).

## **The Hermit of Cedar Island Part II**

Some folks think that Ezra Brockway lived on Cedar Island ever since his narrow escape from the British during the Patriot War in 1838. Indeed, he used to tell the men from Chippewa Bay that he felt he needed to get as far away as possible from the enemy. Ezra related to the Denner family that he made the difficult journey to Chippewa, ending up on Cedar Island, "away from everyone and did not show himself much until the excitement died down." The only problem with that story is the fact that he was father to four more children, from 1840 to 1846. In 1840, he and his family were listed in the 1840 US census in Ogdensburg and in the 1848 Canada census in Prescott.

The Denner family owned a lot of land around Chippewa Bay at the time that Ezra Brockway lived there. What is known is the fact that Mr. Brockway purchased Cedar Island in 1854 for \$25, but he could have been there before that time. A. (Arthur) F. Denner recalled to writer Ernest G. Cook of going with his father as a young boy to visit Ezra, which would have been in the late 1860s to early 1870s. He said Ezra was always very kind to them. According to Arthur, Mr. Brockway was a great gardener. "It seemed as though everything he grew was thrifty." One frosty fall morning, as he and his father went over to hunt ducks they thought there was a flock of sheep in Ezra's garden. As they got closer they discovered it was not sheep at all, but a patch of huge white squash!

Ezra became known as the best salve maker in St. Lawrence County, as he was the inventor and sole proprietor of Brockway Salve. It was considered a "cure-all" by many in the North Country. He made other remedies such as "Red Drop," (also known as "Liquid Red Rub") a liniment that was well liked by consumers. Even though it was advised for external use only, one writer reported that there were a few customers who drank it "with great satisfaction." According to A. F. Denner, the hermit toiled for hours to gather his herbs, plants, weeds and bark and then transform them into his medicinal concoctions. He would usually get someone else to transport the goods to North Country stores. However, it was reported in the Ogdensburg Journal on March 16, 1871 that "Ezra Brockway was in town Wednesday, selling his medicine...His place of abode is on Cedar Island, Chippewa Bay." Mr. Denner shared that the increasing popularity of Ezra's salve brought several people who tried to get the recipe from him. They even looked through his papers when he was out gathering herbs, but their searches brought no information.

As a young boy, Arthur Denner recalled sitting in Mr. Brockway's hut with his father, James, and hearing many tales from the man. "I heard him recount that he had deeds to all of British Columbia, Central America, Mexico and would often add South America and Africa. He seemed to actually believe it and at times he had me believing he was right in what he said...He insisted that he was of royal blood and I remember one day the scow taking some lumber over to him from Chippewa Bay and as they neared the little dock at his island, the helper on the scow cast off the line, expecting Brockway to pick it up and make the boat fast. Not so, Ezra Brockway, he of royal blood, would not touch the line. That was beneath his dignity. The man on the scow had to jump ashore and tie the line himself."

Along with the belief that Ezra thought he was of royal blood, son of Napoleon Bonaparte and owner of the universe, he felt he did not need to pay any land taxes. The town officials decided it was best to not pursue the matter. Here's a bit more from one of his obituaries. "For a few years past he was a monomaniac upon the subject of spiritualism and was known as the 'World Builder.' He signed his name, Sir George William Recks Bonaparte, King of the Universal World." That seems to be rather bizarre thinking!

In Ezra's later years, no one could get him to leave his cabin in the wintertime, so each day the locals would watch for smoke coming from the chimney. In late winter of 1876, no smoke could be seen, so a few men went to check on Ezra. They found the door to the cabin ajar and snow had drifted inside. The old hermit lay near death and was quickly carried to a home on the mainland. The doctor was summoned but he said Ezra was near the end of his days. Indeed, Ezra died about a week later on March 21st.. A lady came and pressed him on his deathbed for those recipes of the salve and Red Drop. Ezra lifted his finger up to his forehead and said, "The recipe is right here in my head-and there it will remain."

No one was ever able to come close to making a salve like Mr. Brockway, nor could anyone find any writings with any hints of his ingredients, proportions or method of preparation. Ezra was buried in the Pleasant Valley Cemetery in Hammond, but it is unsure where the actual gravesite is. However, the life of this hermit of Cedar Island, filled with a mixture of fact and fiction, will continue to peak the interest of readers in generations to come.