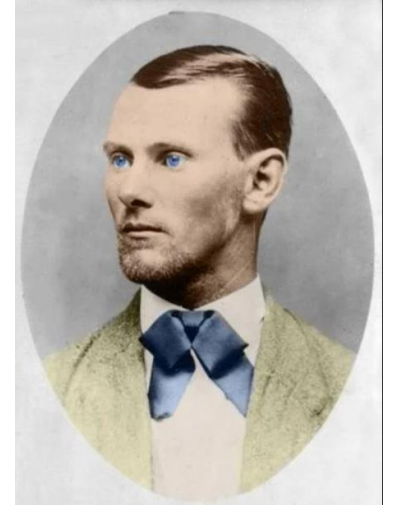## CULTURAL MOMENT FOR APRIL 8, 2024

CELEBRATING JESSE JAMES, THE OUTLAW

Did Jesse James ride the country roads of Wellington County?

Between the end of the Civil War and his murder in 1882 at the hands of gang member Bob Ford, Jesse James was America's most notorious bandit. In the company of his brother Frank, their pals the Younger brothers, and other assorted ne'er-do-wells, James plundered banks, trains and stagecoaches.

Because of his "business," his whereabouts were not documented; however, according to local stories, Jesse James spent at least one winter in the area, dividing his time between Wellington and Grey counties. He was allegedly seen riding a beautiful horse on the backroads and was said to have various hideouts along his way north. In 1873, a botched train robbery at Turkey Creek, Iowa may have brought Jesse and Frank James to Ontario, as they were not seen in the United States for months.

Some stories say James did chores on a farm near Hopeville, and had meals with a neighbour named William Armstrong, who was a farmer and a preacher. In the forest near the road between Hopeville and Dundalk there was a small shack where a man named Chadwell lived. No one really knows whether Chadwell was his real name because he also used other names. The shack was crude but well hidden. Mr. Armstrong recalled, "Jesse James was a fir sized man. He never talked. He would come in, eat his meals and walk out."

In one oft-repeated story, James was riding that beautiful horse through Guelph Township when he came to a tollgate. He tossed a $20 gold piece to the gatekeeper, a young woman named Jane Lillie, because it was the smallest change he had. Lillie eventually moved to West Garafraxa, and the story of the gold piece became part of local lore. The Jesse James stories were published from time to time in the *Mount Forest Confederate* and the *Arthur Enterprise News.*

Meanwhile in West Garafraxa, Jim Gow had a logging operation in the Luther and Grand Valley area. The logs were cut and hauled to the Grand River to be floated down to a sawmill east of Fergus. Gow said he hired James to work at his camp.

In an article in the *Arthur Enterprise News,* it described a man thought to be James riding a beautiful horse up the Owen Sound Road through town heading north to Hopeville. The next account of James comes from Mulmur Township, where speculation has him burying gold along 10 Sideroad.

James was killed on April 3, 1882, in St. Joseph, Missouri.

Whether the story of James' time in our area is true or not, we will never know for sure. But what is interesting is that while James was supposedly in the area there was a bank robbery in Guelph and the thieves were never apprehended.

While we'll probably never know the facts, sometimes legends make reality and become more useful than facts.

Submitted by Bonny McDougall, Wellington North Cultural Roundtable