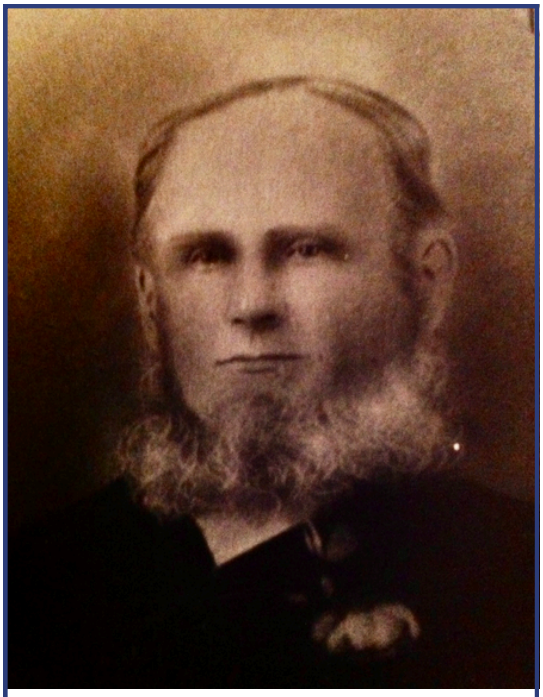
A Reunion of Worsleys

IEvery summer, families gather across Kawartha Lakes to share stories, laughter, and the simple joy of being together. For the Worsley family, however, this tradition carries a remarkable sense of history. This year marks the 90th family reunion, a milestone that celebrates not only the strength of family ties, but also a legacy that stretches back generations in Kawartha Lakes.

That story begins with Joseph and Ann (nee Hodgkinson) Worsley, whose arrival and early life here laid the foundation for a family that would grow, settle, and weave itself deeply into the fabric of the Fenelon area. Like many early families in the area, their lives were shaped by hard work, perseverance, and a commitment to building a future for the generations that would follow.

I was first approached by Jenna Stephens, a member of the Worsley family, to examine an ornate necklace passed down through generations. What began as a research project soon became a journey into the family's history, exploring stories, newspaper clippings, photographs, and personal accounts. My research deepened further through conversations with Nancy Webster, one of the many family historians, and her cousins, who had a great deal to share.



Joseph Worsley, b.1807



Anne Hodgkinson, b. 1872

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Joseph Worsley's story began in Cheshire, England, as the youngest of six children, born 1807. On the family farm, he learned how to work the land with his father, James Worsley. His mother, Charlotte, passed away in 1845, leaving a deep void in the family. Yet the steady cadence of farm life continued, with James guiding Joseph and his siblings through the seasons until his own death in 1852.

Joseph married Ann Hodgkinson in 1831 at St. Mary's Church in Cheadle. In 1857, following the emigration of their oldest son Edwin and his family (in 1857), Joseph and two children, Job and Lois, sailed to New York aboard the City of Washington. A year later, Ann and six more of their children, including seven-year-old Lott, followed on the Jeremiah Thompson. After arriving in New York, they passed through Castle Garden (the precursor to Ellis Island), onto Rochester, then into Canada, reaching Lindsay via Port Hope to reunite with their family. The entire family (of 12 children) [KC1] had reunited in Ontario by 1888, as the other four children and their families had emigrated to Ontario by then.

After two years in Mariposa Township near Oakwood, the family moved to Grasshill for a year and eventually found home in 1864 on Lot 16, Concession 4, in the community of Zion - Fenelon in Fenelon Township. A copy of a handwritten account shared by Larry Bell, a great, great-grandson of Joseph and Ann, based on his cousin Carman Byrnell's recollections, states that the family lived in a one-room log cabin until their deaths (Joseph in 1890, Anne in 1898). The cabin was demolished in the 1970s.

Today, the descendants of Joseph and Ann Worsley have found a creative way to navigate their ever-expanding family tree. With 12 children at its foundation and more than 35 grandchildren spanning four major branches, the family has adopted a colour-coded system to distinguish each line.



Lott and Jane (Smithson) Worsley and Family, c. 1910

Nancy and her cousins Larry, Judy Stephens (Bell), and Cindy Barrett (Worsley), descendants of the Lott Worsley “Red Line” and Tracy Carney and Lynda Lawson, descendants of the Edwin Worsley “Blue Line,” shared stories that have been told many times before, though they never seem to grow old. Laughter came easily as they recalled the traditions that shaped their family gatherings.

With the “Red Line” branch descending from Lott Worsley (youngest of the 12), and his wife, Jane Smithson, family history has been carefully preserved. In 1877, Lott and his father built a log cabin for his family across the road from his father’s home, on Lot 16, Concession 5. Lott’s youngest son, Walter ‘Cecil,’ inherited the family farm in the late 1930s, while Lott and Jane moved to Queen Street, Fenelon Falls around 1940. Their six other children settled nearby. Lott’s original home was later owned by Larry’s grandparents. It was sold after 1969 and moved in 1971 to the S.S. No. 5 Fenelon School property, where its still attached to the building. Larry attended the school years before the move, unaware of the future connection. “If it hadn’t been moved, it would have decayed,” he reflected, adding, “At least I can say my mother was born in that house.”

I Reflecting on her work, Nancy described years of research, gathering photographs, letters, and personal memories passed down through generations. “It started with a box of old photos,” she explained. “But once you begin, you realize how much there is to uncover, and how important it is not to lose it.” Her efforts have culminated in a detailed family history book, preserving names and dates with the stories that bring them to life.

Nancy remembers her grandparents, Wilbert and Mary Louise ‘Louie’ Wood of Cambray, “My grandfather was a tall man, nearly six feet, with a somewhat stern demeanor. My ‘more-granny,’ the name my sister Bonnie and I gave her, was just four feet tall, wore size 2 shoes, and was always smiling. I remember her glasses perched on the tip of her nose.” Nancy also remembers her More Granny, saying "Do good to as many persons as possible.” Fitting, as the Worsley family motto is Quam Plurimis Prodesse (How to Benefit Many).

For some members of the ‘Blue Line,’ descendants of the oldest Worsley child, Edwin, the connection to this vast and interesting family has only recently come to light. Lynda, another keen family historian, said her grandfather Gordon (great-grandson of Edwin) was adopted into a neighbouring family. Through tidbits of information gathering, the link into the Worsley line was made around 2018. “The most wonderful thing was finding who we look like…and we look like Worsleys!” says Lynda with a big smile.

In the family history book, it is joked that Eunice Conner (Worsley), the Reunion treasurer for 50 years, would say, the “federal government may recognize holidays like New Year’s Day, Christmas, and Thanksgiving, their family calendar would have a few more. Zion Decoration Day and the Worsley Reunion, would surely be listed right alongside the national holidays.”

The Worsley family treats reunions as an important tradition, meeting regularly and contributing through volunteer roles and to a family newsletter. Since the first reunion on September 6, 1937, the tradition has continued almost every year, with changing locations and attendance but a consistent spirit throughout. That first reunion was held at Birch Point, where 161 people came together for the occasion, including 115 direct descendants of Joseph and Ann Worsley. For the 50th anniversary of the reunion in 1986, a commemorative plate was designed and made for everyone in attendance! These efforts help keep gatherings organized and maintain strong connections by sharing updates on new and departed family members.

Tracey, of the “Blue Line” branch, didn’t grow up attending the family reunions as some of her relatives did. However, she has embraced the Blue Line with a desire to learn as much of the family’s history as possible and has attended the reunions for “about five years.” As Tracey explains, “It’s who we are. For me, we didn’t know our history, so I want to be a sponge and learn everything there is to learn.”

It was Tracey’s two daughters who first sparked her deeper interest in the family’s history, eventually leading her to connect with Lynda, who was able to share more information about the Worsleys.

The reunion has had its share of interruptions. The COVID-19 pandemic forced the family to pause their gathering for a couple of years. Even that interruption could not diminish the importance of the event, and when the family gatherings returneded, it was with renewed appreciation for the simple joy of being together. The importance of the reunion lives on for Larry, “You get to meet people, relatives, you haven’t seen in a long time, see old acquittances, a lot of the older ones are gone…”



Edwin and Matilda (King) Worsley and Family c. 1900

Now, as the Worsley family prepares to celebrate their 90th reunion on August 15, the tradition continues with the same warmth that brought the family together nine decades ago. This year's gathering will take place at the Oakwood Lions Mariposa Community Hall, where family and friends will meet from 10:30am to 6:30pm for a day of amazing food, games, conversation, and shared memories. The afternoon of Sunday, August 16 will include a visit to Zion Fenelon Cemetery and Church (including the Worsley Cemetery), on land donated by Harold Worsley, on the east side of Mark Road. The Decoration Service will be at 2pm, a quiet and meaningful moment to remember the generations who came before.

"It's a place to share connections and memories, part of history, and it shows how much you belong to the area," said Cindy. Judy added, "It's important for future generations of Worsleys to attend reunions to strengthen connections and discover new ones."

The reunion honours the descendants of the Worsley family, and celebrates something larger;: the enduring legacy of the early settling families who shaped the Fenelon area. Each year, as laughter echoes through the hall and familiar names are spoken once more, it serves as a reminder that history is not only found in books or records. Sometimes it lives most vividly in the simple act of family coming together, year after year, to remember where they came from and the bonds that continue to hold them together.

"For me, the reunions are a chance to celebrate life's successes and milestones, share stories that keep the memories of our lost loved ones alive, strengthen our bonds between generations, and deepen our sense of belonging," said Jenna Stephens.