

Chains on the Landscape: Re-enacting Surveying in “The Land Between”

By Yvonne Drebert, Producer, The Ontario Visual Heritage Project

“This much I will say as far as I have explored the prospects are not flattering which I am sorry to relate...” These are the words of Surveyor John Huston, found in a letter written in 1826 to Thomas Ridout, the Surveyor General of Upper Canada. Huston was describing lands in the southern part of what is now Haliburton County, and the northern reaches of *The Land Between*. In 1826, surveyors were neither interested in biodiversity nor cottage properties – settlement was their number one concern (however, if they happened upon a large mineral deposit while they were out, it was a pleasant bonus).

The Land Between is what ecologists call an ecotone, a large transition zone which lies between the Canadian Shield and the St. Lawrence Lowlands stretching 240 kilometers across south-central Ontario from Georgian Bay to Kingston. With the help of the Ontario Trillium Foundation and many community groups, a three part documentary series is being created on this diverse and fragile landscape. The thin soils, rocky barrens, and

wetlands characteristic of *The Land Between* were the cause of great concern for early surveyors. Andrew Miller,



David inspecting the circumferentor from 1857.

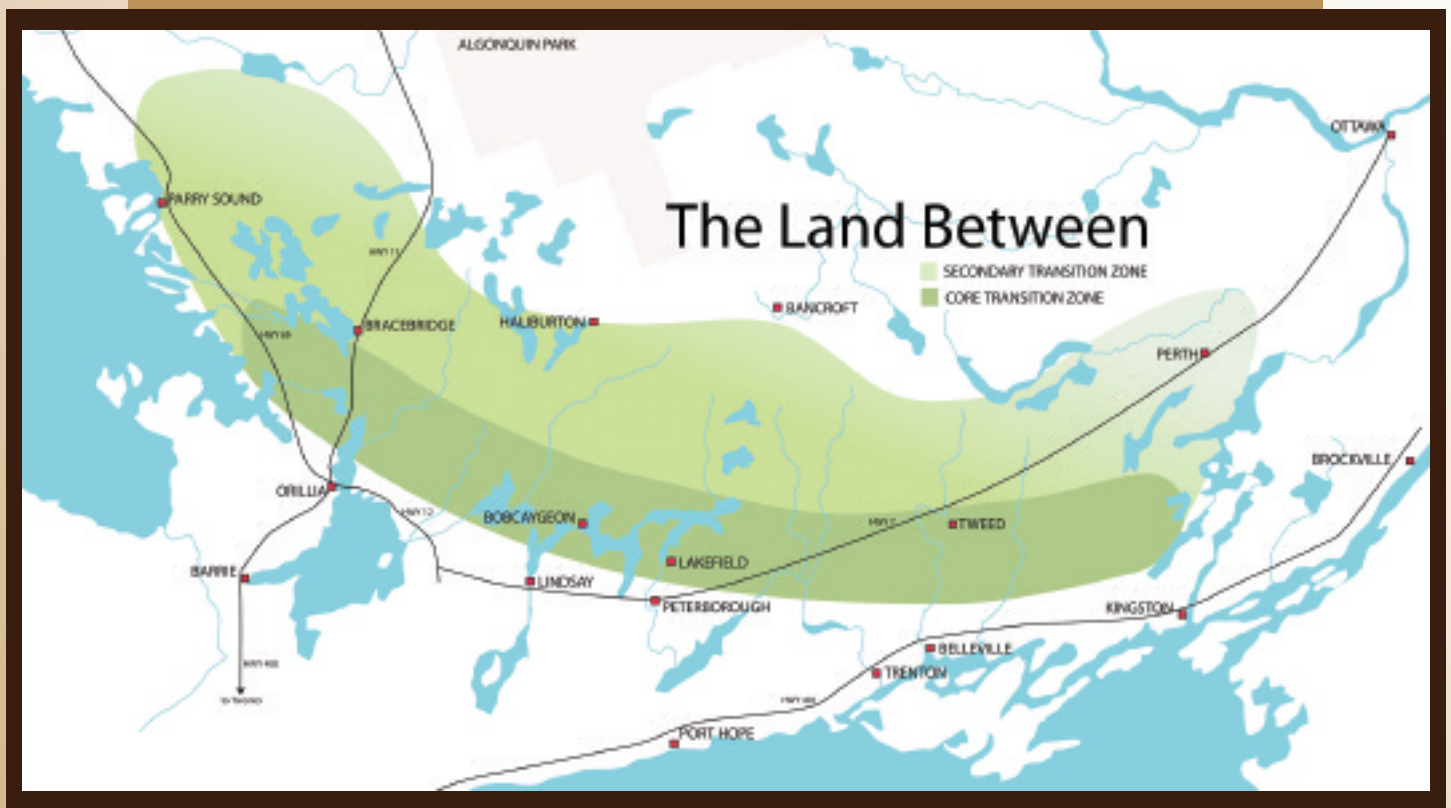
who surveyed Burleigh and Harvey townships in 1823, found that they constituted an “extremely rough and rugged tract of Country; comprising but very little if any land that in the strict sense of the word may be called good tillable land.”

On April 2nd, three brave volunteers relived some of what Miller and Huston and his fellow surveyors faced in the 1800s in a re-enactment for *The Land Between* series. David Dossett, Poul-Erik Busk, and Lyle Merriam donned many layers of wool, rolled in the mud, and lugged historical surveying equipment over the limestone plains of the Warsaw Caves Conservation Area and Campground. Devon Jacobs from Curve Lake First Nation, acted as a guide for the surveyors, as in historic times when First Nations people were relied upon to navigate the areas of the province that were largely unknown to Europeans.

The views of the surveyors of the 1800s are quite different from contem-



Poul-Erik, Lyle, David, and Devon on the Limestone Plain



porary sentiments. “Much of the scenery chosen for the shoot was spectacular and the equipment was state-of-the-art (Red Cam, etc.), so I know that the finished project will be high-quality,” said re-enactment surveyor, David Dossett. “Re-enactments such as these are a fantastic way to engage the audience and attract people who would otherwise not be interested in the history of this region. During breaks in the filming we often answered questions about the project from the many curious passers-by who indicated that they were eager to see the finished result. For me, it was a very enjoyable and rewarding experience - I learned a lot about the conditions endured while trying to map that remote area, and I would eagerly participate in another similar project if given the opportunity.”

The Association of Ontario Land Surveyors was consulted prior to filming and graciously lent out the necessary implements for the task, including: Gunter’s chains, level, transit, Jacob’s Staff, tripod, and circumferentor ‘sighting compass’ from 1857. Series Director, Zach Melnick noted that “The artifacts and advice garnered from the Association of Ontario Land Surveyors really lent an authenticity to the re-enactments that would’ve been difficult to duplicate otherwise. There was something about using actual, period tools that really helped to transport the actors - and the resulting scenes, back in time.”

For the last year, the Living History Multimedia Association has been hard at work on *The Land Between*, part of its *Ontario Visual Heritage Project*. The Living History Multimedia Association is non-profit organization dedicated to the preservation and promotion of Ontario’s local history through educational and entertaining media. The central component of this project will be a broadcast-ready documentary series featuring the natural and cultural history of *The Land Between*, complete with cinematic re-enactments of historical events, interviews, photographs and film. Also included in the tool-kit are an interactive website, a course-guide for educators, an interactive DVD and Blu-Ray disc and a “Mobile Companion” for iPhones and Blackberries. In the fall of 2011, a series of launch events will be held across the Land Between to celebrate the completion of the project, the story of the land and the distribution of the tool kits to every school, library and museum in the area - free of charge. To find out more about the project, and to watch the previous eleven projects in streaming media, go to www.visualheritage.ca.



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