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A GERMAN TRAVELLER IN UPPER CANADA IN 1837

TRANSLATION FROM THE GERMAN



BY THE HONOURABLE WILLIAM RENWICK RIDDELL

[*Freidrich Gerstacker, born in 1816, at Hamburg, sailed in 1837 for America on the Constitution. After remaining a short time in New York, he went up the Hudson to Albany, and then by the Erie Canal westward. The account below begins with his leaving Niagara Falls. It is believed that a foreigner's impressions of Upper Canada in those times may be of interest. The passages translated begin at page fifty-nine of the Tostenoble (Jena) edition of Gerstacker's "Strief-und Jagdzuge durch die Vereinigten Staaten Nordamerikas."*]

MY heart was still full of this magnificent wonder of nature, and I had no desire to spend the night in the small town of Manchester, lying close by the Falls; so I followed the first road into the country which presented itself, partly to hunt and partly to seek out a house in which to find shelter for the night.

It was growing darker and darker, the mud becoming deeper and deeper, as I at last by good fortune noticed the glow of a light breaking like a guiding star through the ever-thickening gloom. It was the peaceful and pleasant dwelling of a Pennsylvania blacksmith who had settled here in the State of New York, and who, with generous hospitality, now fed the hungry and prepared a warm bed for the weary.

I heard here, as well as at several farm-houses, that Canada was a beautiful country, that game filled the woods there to overflowing and that bears and wolves not seldom gave occupation to the bold hunter.

Here, then, was the prospect of an interesting life. "Canada," "bear-hunt"—these two words were in themselves sufficient to unfold before me new and delightful pictures. Where I should go was a matter of absolutely no importance: I should get to know the country; and whether I began at the north or the south was all one.

So I did not require long consideration. On November 1st, a steamboat took me from Lewiston, a little town on the Niagara, to Toronto: at this place, however, I remained only a night, as I arrived very late, and early the next morning went by another boat on to Hamilton.

Hamilton is a pleasant little city on Lake Ontario, in Canada, and, though it lies but a short distance from the frontier of the United States, a very great difference can be observed, as well speaking generally as in many small particulars. The greater part of the settlers in Canada are English, Scotch or Irish; and these

have for the most part retained their old customs—at least, so it appeared to me in the very short time I was there and had an opportunity for observation. The money, too, is English, although American money is also current; and one would on the other side of the lake look in vain for sceptre and crown, which here decorate signs, etc., as commonly as they do in the old land.

I hurt my foot in Hamilton, and was forced to remain there Friday the 3rd November, unpleasant as it was for me; but early on Saturday I set out in splendid weather, quite recovered and happy. into the glorious open country, and like the schoolmaster in the story felt sympathy for the people in the streets because they had to stay there. From Hamilton I went to Dundas (also on Lake Ontario), took thence a northerly direction and made my way toward the town of Preston. I turned to the right, however, two miles ahead to get to New Hope, where, as I had heard, an old German hunter was living.

On Sunday afternoon I arrived safely at New Hope, and, making inquiries there about the old German's place, I reached it that evening by dark. He was not at home; but six children of all sizes looked up with bright eyes in astonishment at the stranger and his outlandish get-up. The master was at church with his wife; and the eldest daughter, a girl of sixteen, was teaching her smaller brothers and sisters reading and spelling out an old tattered (who knows whether understood?) catechism. I sat down quietly in a corner, awaiting the arrival of the older members of the family, and listening to the prattle of the children.

At last the heads of the family made their appearance. The old man belonged to the religious sect of Tunkers, and allowed his beard to grow full under the chin. They greeted the

stranger most heartily as soon as they could free themselves from the children leaping upon them.

At first the old man appeared to look on me with somewhat distrustful eyes, of course on account of my weapon; for Canada stood upon the threshold of the Rebellion which broke out only a few weeks later, and these "peaceful Dutchmen" seemed to find no particular pleasure in the growing unrest. When, however, I told him the reason of my visit, he quickly became friendly and familiar; he laid aside his church clothes, and we then sat down by the warm stove, which is, in Canada, on account of the extreme cold, frequently to be found instead of a fire-place.

The conversation turned for the most part on farming and hunting. The old man seemed to understand the former thoroughly; and he was passionately fond of the latter. This was the man for me. He told me a great deal of the former abundance of game which now, however, had retreated before the increasing population which went into the woods and frightened the game by repeated shots without accomplishing more than crippling some poor deer. I fancy he was talking sarcastically. He boasted, too, that he seldom missed at a "turkey-shoot." Turkey-shooting is practised here, exactly as Cooper so strikingly describes it in "The Pioneers." When the night was far advanced, the old man showed me to a bed under the roof, in which I certainly found no scarcity of fresh air; but I slept soundly.

During the evening, he had told me of a lake only a few miles distant in which a tremendous number of ducks had taken up their abode; and at daylight I set out to get a few for roasting.

My new acquaintance, of course, showed me approximately the direction in which I would find the lake—a road, however, was not to be thought

of. Still, I believed I should be able to find the water, even without the compass, and set off briskly. But the wood got thicker and thicker, the upturned trees lying across and through each other became more and more numerous; and the sun was already high when I at last took the compass from my pocket, and with its help I followed a straight course and I fortunately arrived at the lake. I found a great flock of ducks; but, apparently made shy by other hunters, they kept the middle of the lake, and very few swam around by the margin.

This was another difficulty; but as the lake did not seem to me to be large, I made up my mind to go around it.

I had killed three ducks, one by one; and somewhat ardently pursuing the game had not observed the progress of the day. Now I all at once noticed that the sun had declined very far toward the west. To get around the lake before sundown was, as I recognised, not possible, for as I could see at the clearings, I had not traversed half the distance; and in the northeast were gathered heavy masses of clouds which had almost overtaken the fleeing sun and sent the wind in advance whistling and roaring.

I saw nothing for it but to camp here. The few pieces of hard bread which I found in my pocket had little effect in allaying my hunger; and I did not take the time to roast one of the ducks. Moreover, the weather appeared to be on the point of becoming very disagreeable. I had got into very bad humour when, just at the right time, as I was going slowly along the shore, I found a canoe hewn out of a tree trunk. It was made fast to a root. Without a second thought I climbed in and paddled some two-and-a-half English miles to the other shore, a huge, high, dead tree serving me as a mark to steer by.

The wind blew strong and the waves pitched the rudely-built and clumsy vessel about to such an extent that I had to apply all my strength and skill to keep in equilibrium and to propel it through the waves. In the meantime the sky began to be clouded over with snowflakes to such an extent that I was covered in a short time and only with difficulty could I keep my eyes upon the dead tree, and so hold my direction. At last I landed, fastened the boat to the shore and tried to find a road to some settlement.

In the meantime it had become quite dark; but a short distance ahead I was fortunate enough to discover a narrow foot-path, off which the snow melted in consequence of the wet and which led me through the wood like a faint line. I followed it confidently; and, at length, after walking perhaps an hour and a half, the glow of a distant light appeared, to which I hastily and joyfully made my way. I quickly reached it and soon was knocking at the outside door—which was at the same time the room door—of a farmer's house.

A German voice asked, "*Wer ist da?*" (Who is there?), and this streamed like balsam over my whole frame — particularly over the stomach.

It was the wife of a German wagon-maker who opened the door. Her husband had ridden to the small village a few miles away, but was expected back at any moment. The warm stove called back to new activity my nearly frozen animal spirits; and a cup of warm coffee which she set before me restored me quite to my former self. After the lapse of an hour or so, the husband, a friendly German, arrived. He had been three years in the country; he had come over without a red cent, but now he had acquired a very pretty little house, a bit of land and plenty of custom.

As it had snowed very hard all night, I promised myself a good hunt,

and set out very early. My host would on no condition accept money for his hospitality, so I left him the game shot the day before. I loaded the left barrel of my hunting-piece for this day with buckshot, the right with duckshot; and putting on fresh caps, I stepped out of the room which was hot as an oven into the fresh, cool morning air, drinking it in in long thirsty draughts.

I had wandered around something over an hour without shooting anything but a rabbit and a partridge, when suddenly a man met me whom I could not at a distance distinctly place; but soon I recognised that he was a civilised Indian.

He was dressed in a short woollen coat, dark blue trousers with wide seams protruding. His feet were covered with moccasins, and his head with a red woollen scarf, wound round like a turban. His fiery black eyes blazed out from under this, and his straight black hair hung down over his temples. In his ears he had a pair of crystal earrings. His Indian belt, decorated with pearls, held a tomahawk; on his right side hung a plain powder-horn and a bullet-pouch, and his American rifle lent to the whole figure a romantic appearance.

After a short greeting and hand shake, we tried to make ourselves understood. This was certainly no easy task, for he spoke only broken English; and I did not know much even of this language. Upon my asking him whether he had seen much game, he pointed along in front of him upon the ground where a bear track still quite fresh was to be seen in the snow. He beckoned me to go along with him; and I fancy I need not say that I followed him with a heart beating with joy and impatience.

The hunt was not distinguished by anything more noteworthy than the killing of a bear, quite young—indeed only eight or nine months old—the

parents of which had apparently been shot a short time before. So far as I was concerned, I did but little harm to the little black rascal with my shot gun, notwithstanding all my huntsman's ardour. The Indian sold the little creature later in Preston for \$4, and probably drank up the proceeds there; at all events, I left him busily engaged at that job when I took leave of him.

After this hunt, I traversed the wood again for a while alone, but with very little success; for not being acquainted with the bush and not being able to find my way about properly, I dare not venture to go any great distance from the settlements. Besides, as I was a very young hunter, I was hardly in a position to be perfectly sure that I would kill every day what I needed for my own support.

The weather, too, certainly did not serve to make living in the open air comfortable; I was as yet too short a time living such a life. Now and then I, of course, came across country people with whom I lodged for the night. The description which they gave me of a Canadian winter was not enticing, and I determined that I would beat a retreat before I found myself snowed in.

In order to carry out this decision, I struck a southerly direction towards Lake Ontario again, where, as I was told, the road would lead to Buffalo.

Here in the woods, I was destined to have an adventure, but one not crowned with any success on my part. While I was following in the proper direction a little foot-path or cow-path, suddenly I caught sight of seven wolves standing in front of me at a distance of about seventy yards. Without thinking, I bent down softly into the snow to load one barrel of my gun with a bullet, as I was afraid that I could not do anything with shot. When I got up, the wolves had "bid good-bye" and left me the empty satisfaction of having my trouble for my

pains. I was frantic. As they had fled southeasterly, I had a mind to follow them to get the scalp of a beast of prey like them—the Government offered a reward of \$6 for every wolf-scalp. Since, however, the sun was apparently near setting, I gave up the pursuit.

The Canadians maintain that the wolves of that country, when first sheep were introduced by the settlers, were so afraid of these new-comers that they would not come near them. With time, they became accustomed to the new and strange animals, and certainly very much to their disadvantage, for hardly had they got a bite of the first of them, than the flesh tasted to them extraordinarily good; and now they were occasioning no insignificant damage among the flocks.

Moreover, the accusation is made against the Canadian wolf—I do not know whether rightly or wrongly—that his bite is deadly, and that sheep or dogs which have been bitten are sure to die, although the wound in other respects would not be at all fatal.

During the day I had seen several deer, but was not in a position to creep up within gun-shot of any; and at last had to be satisfied with a rabbit which ran across the road.

There was no use thinking of a house this evening, as I found myself no longer even upon a path in the bush, but I was in the true sense of the words "all in the woods." Accordingly, before it became dark, I dragged together as much wood as I could find near by, cleared away the snow and kindled a fire under the pile, which soon blazed up pleasantly.

When I had warmed myself sufficiently, I got to work to clean my little rabbit and broil it. This I accomplished without much ceremony. I cleaned it out with snow as well as I could and stuck it on a twig immediately over the fire; while I laid a piece of bark below so as to catch the fat

which fried out; and I poured this fat over the roast again. It is true that I missed salt and bread very much, but hunger is a splendid cook. The hind legs I laid aside for breakfast; but the rest of the dish I finished. This over, I heaped up my fire, and with my hunting-bag under my head, my fur cap drawn over my eyes and feet toward the fire, I prepared to spend my first night in the open air in America.

I fell asleep very quickly and so soundly that I did not wake up till I was awakened by the sharp morning air. My fire was burned down; and my limbs were shivering with the cold. I trembled so that I could scarcely blow the fire up again; but at last I succeeded, and gradually my stiff limbs were quite thawed out. The morning sun found me buried in the contemplation of my two rabbit hams, which I inspected so long that I could see the very bones.

When I had cared sufficiently for my creature comforts, I renewed with new vigour my march toward the south, and at about 10 o'clock, the crowing of a domestic cock showed me that I was not far from a human residence. I marched in that direction with long strides; and soon was greeted by the barking of a pack of hounds.

The owner of the house was in the bush chopping wood and splitting fence-rails (the long poles which are laid upon each other to enclose the fields. The enclosure is itself called a "fence"). His wife, a tidy American, hospitably set before me bread and milk; she assured me that I was not more than twenty miles distant from the road to Buffalo, and that I would come across a good many farm-houses if I went somewhat farther to the south. She refused on any consideration to take money for the refreshments; and after heartily thanking her, I walked away through the legion of hounds and marched forward in such joyous mood that the Canadian

bush resounded with German songs. On the following morning, I reached the graded road to Buffalo, which led through a continuous succession of farms and was travelled by a kind of stage coach. I had returned to the cultivated part of the country. The farmer here grows a great deal of wheat, which succeeds very well, and also oats and barley; particularly, however, Indian corn, although this crop does not in the north arrive at the same perfection as in the south. The cobs were small and most of them that I saw had yellow grains.

About thirty miles from the city, I came across a cattle dealer from the United States, who was returning home. He was a friendly man, and I made up my mind to travel the thirty miles to Buffalo with him, for company's sake. It did not take long for us to become acquainted with each other. He was driving home two huge fat oxen out of Canada to the United States; and at the same time was riding a terribly lean horse. Nevertheless, he very hospitably invited me to take turns with him on his *Rosinante*, as he himself would like to walk a little.

Riding would not have been amiss—for there was a fine rain falling and the roads had become very slippery—if the good man had not tried to make a deal for the horse I was riding with everyone he met—he was even willing to give it in trade for two cows. It certainly must, many a time, have looked comical enough when the miserable beast upon which I was riding was offered “dirt cheap” to those who passed or met us.

When he had walked himself tired, he got on and I walked. He had in his pocket a book containing some sort of most touching tragedy; and every time he got himself settled firm in the saddle, he took it out and began to declaim, holding the book in

his left hand while he gesticulated with the right, in which he at the same time carried the long ox-whip. At each of the somewhat vehement movements occasioned by the powerful parts of the tragedy, movements made with the right arm and therefore with the whip, the whip brought so much discomfort to the oxen that these poor creatures, who always kept their eyes fixed on the lash, shied back, and only a “Shoo Buck! Oh! Oh!” which often interrupted very prosaically his pathetic tones, would bring the horned and involuntary hearers back to their duty.

On the evening of the 11th November, I came for the second time to the Falls of Niagara, and was now enabled to look in wonder upon their magnificence and grandeur from the Canadian side also.

From that point the way winds up to Lake Erie—and this makes a splendid way to travel. The street itself is smooth and dry, on the left the glorious broad Niagara river shaded by the dark primeval forest, on the right one fine farm after another with the most beautiful orchards—it is an enchanting sight. The distance which we thus travelled seemed to me but a few steps. Some miles from Buffalo we boarded a ferry worked by horses over the Niagara river, and were soon again in the United States.

What I saw of Canada shows me that it is—at least in these parts—a beautiful and fertile country, with a salubrious though very cold climate. And it is on account of this extreme cold that I would never select Canada for a place of residence, not even in Upper Canada lying furthest to the south. The land produces splendid grain; but still not much can be made of sheep and swine-raising, as the numerous wolves attack these animals, unless the farmers are willing to pay more attention to their flocks and herds than to let them run wild.

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