

SPILSBURY STREET NAMED FOR WHONNOCK PIONEERS



In 1889 Brothers Ben and Ashton Spilsbury built this house they called "Findern Farm" on River Road. It was sold to Edward Watson around 1909 and may have burned down during or shortly after the First World War.

SPILSBURY STREET off Lougheed Highway in Whonnock honours three pioneering brothers and their sister. Frank (Francis), Ben (Benjamin), Ashton, and Anne Elizabeth were members of a wealthy upper-class family from Findern, Derbyshire. Landed gentry, "... showing off their breeding and eating up the family fortune," as Jim Spilsbury, Ashton's son, says in his 1990 book *Spilsbury's Album*.

Frank, the oldest, came to Whonnock around 1878 at age twenty. He lived in a house near the shore of the Fraser, spent his time hunting and fishing, and in Jim Spilsbury's words, "... shacked up with an Indian mistress." That "Indian mistress" was the widow Florence Reid née Brousseau of the old Hudson's Bay family from Fort Langley. The 1881 Canada Census shows Florence as "Florence Spilsbury." She probably had a child with Frank, a son called John Edward Spilsbury, born in Whonnock on Christmas Day 1884. It is not certain when Frank left for England, but he spent the rest of his life home in Findern: "living on his own means."

Frank's younger brothers Ben and Ashton bought Frank's property with the exception of some 50 acres of land with Frank's house on it. Some years later Frank sold this property to Arthur Hackney.

The two young men, Ben and Ashton, were 25 and 18 respectively when they settled in Whonnock in 1889. Ben was an all-round sportsman whose fame on the soccer and cricket fields is still remembered in England. Before coming to Canada Ashton was in his third year of medical studies.

On their new land brothers built a large house (long gone) with two grass tennis courts and a croquet lawn reminiscent of the home they had left in England. They called it “Findern Farm.”

Farming is what the brothers had in mind when they bought the property, and the 1891 census shows that they housed and employed seven Chinese labourers working under their direction. Ashton “spent many years and all his fortune” to clear, ditch and drain forty acres, according to Jim Spilsbury.

Eventually Ben lost interest in farming and went back to England. He sold his share of the properties to Ashton, who by 1897 was the sole owner of around 260 acres of land. In September of that year Ashton Spilsbury married Alice Maud Blizzard, but he was not the first of the Spilsbury siblings to marry in Canada.

His sister Elizabeth had come from England to visit the Whonnock farm, when she met her future husband. On a snowy November day in 1896 on Findern Farm the Reverend Dunn married Anne Elizabeth Spilsbury to August Baker from Albion. Later the couple used the original French family name Boulanger instead of the English equivalent Baker.

This marriage must have come as a shock to her siblings and her parents back home. August was a nephew of Frank’s “Indian” companion Florence Reid and of mixed blood. Frank’s relationship was probably silently tolerated—but a marriage? August and Anne Elizabeth travelled to England and stayed at the family home, but there are no reports about how they were received by the family.

Ashton Spilsbury and his wife also travelled to Findern for a visit, and their son Jim was born there. They returned to Whonnock in 1906 or 1907, but soon Ashton found that his hard work was coming to nothing and he sold Findern Farm to Edward Watson. In the pre-war depression years and the First World War Ashton Spilsbury lost everything he owned in Whonnock. So the family moved to Savary Island where they lived in a tent for many years before they could afford building a house.

In 1906 Ben Spilsbury returned to Canada with his Scottish wife Edith Jessie Bairnsfather and started managing the North Vancouver branch of R. Ward & Co.

Elizabeth Boulanger was the only one of the four Spilsbury siblings who remained in Whonnock. The Boulangers probably started living at the Findern Farm but in 1909 they built a house just above Spilsbury Street that is still standing today. There they lived a quiet, simple life. “They liked to drive a pony and trap, the wife holding the reins, and Boulanger holding the dog,” as someone told Daphne Sleight in 1971. Mrs. Boulanger was a great gardener, and occasionally she had teas in her garden.

August Boulanger died on Christmas Day 1938. “We always thought that Mr. Boulanger was a very nice, quiet man ... you never saw him so very much,” remembered another old-timer in 1985. “She was so upset when he died and ... she went back to England and never came back here again.” Going to New York to board a ship, she sat “...in front of the car and August’s ashes up on the dashboard, all the way to New York.”

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