# Exploring the Changing Soundscapes of Waterloo County

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## Introduction

When the idea of exploring the history of our local soundscape was first suggested to me, I was both intrigued and overwhelmed by the prospect. Although I have been exploring the visual dynamics of landscapes for a number of decades, that work is made possible—almost easy—by an abundance of resources: archives of old photos, museum collections, family photo albums, local history books, postcards, paintings, etc.[1] But there are no wax cylinders or scratchy 78s that could be used to explore the former state of our local sonic landscape, or how it may be changing over time. Further, the literature and academic underpinnings for this proposed investigation are practically nonexistent.

Recognizing that the primary resources for conducting such an investigation are severely limited, we have little choice but to turn to the invocations of the written page and extant images. In a word, we need to apply our powers of imagination. On the basis of that simple premise, perhaps we can catch a whisper of the soundscape that might have greeted us if we were able to step back in time.

Fortunately, I was well primed for this 'before-and-after soundscapes' idea, as I happened to have been reading Bernie Krause's wonderful book, *The Great Animal Orchestra*.[2] Krause's profound insight—that healthy ecosystems manifest themselves as highly structured soundscapes—had already begun to sink in. He also makes the point that we modern, educated, and urban humans are not really equipped to appreciate those soundscapes. We have never really learned to listen to natural ecosystems, and our attempts at it are mostly limited to identifying specific sounds. It is as though we would

[1] Virgil Martin, *Changing Landscapes of Southern Ontario* (Erin, ON: Boston Mills Press, 1988).

[2] Bernie L. Krause, *The Great Animal Orchestra: Finding the Origins of Music in the World's Wild Places* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2012).

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congratulate ourselves on being able to pick out the flute and the timpani in a Beethoven symphony, content that we were truly appreciating the music! So, it would seem we are severely hobbled even in our understanding of what reaches our ears today, from what remains of the natural world. That makes the challenge of 'recreating' the natural soundscape of bygone eras even more daunting.

On the domestic front, perhaps we can have an easier time of it. We are much more in tune, after all, with the humdrum of our daily lives, and surely many of the sounds of human activity would be relatively unchanged and therefore convenient reference points to guide our explorations. Both indoors and out, I am fairly certain that, were we able to travel back in time, we would be struck by the hubbub, the busyness, and the general intensity of activity. Yes, there would be the clatter of pots and pans, the rattle of dishes being done, bare feet thumping across kitchen floorboards, the 'ca-chunk' of firewood being split, and the pleasant whirr of the spinning wheel. But with half-a-dozen, maybe more, children around the house and in the yard? Well, you get the picture. Add to that a great ruckus of cattle, sheep, pigs, chickens and roosters, horses, and of course the farm dog, and I'm guessing the truly quiet moments were almost as scarce and fleeting as they are today.

The sounds of human enterprise—whether from a farm, a mill, or any other industry—are likely to be music to the ears of those who profit from it. Neighbors may not hear this as 'music'—unless, of course, they too have a stake in it. To everyone else, it's just noise. But of course there is no such thing as 'just noise'. It is by definition unwanted and even irritating, and thus it matters! It would be a mistake, however, to think that noise is a new phenomenon; it's been with us, and no doubt complained about, at least since the time of Noah's Ark.

What follows is a fictional time-traveler's account, somewhat autobiographically infused, of what one might have heard in what is now the Region of Waterloo, Ontario, at fifty-year intervals over the past 200 years.

**1814**

It is the dead of winter, snowy and cold. I'm standing alone at the edge of a tiny clearing, all stubbly with fresh stumps. There are some brush piles and various scattered logs, and beyond that: trees and more trees. But there is

not the slightest sound. In summer, at least there would be the hum of the relentless mosquito cloud to break the silence of the long night. But now, complete nothingness. Just darkness and utter silence, stretching upward to the stars and countless miles into the forest in every direction. Minutes pass (or perhaps it's hours—there's nothing here to mark the passage of time) and the soundscape remains blank. Pure, undefiled, crystalline silence. Pure, utterly boring, desolate silence. I slowly become aware of my heartbeat, and the pulsing, rushing swish of blood in my veins, and the faint whisper of air in my nostrils. And that ringing in my ears. . . . Why haven't I noticed that before? It's really annoying! Is there even such a thing as silence? Or is it just a fleeting, maddening illusion?

I shuffle my feet to break the spell, and I realize that my toes are getting numb. It's enough to dispel the oppressive void for the moment at least, and I stand listening again, not to the silence but for sounds—any sound—that might be out there, somewhere. Perhaps, if I listen hard enough, I might even be able to hear the muffled thud of cannon fire from the Niagara frontier. But, of course, I have no realistic expectation of it. Then, without warning or fanfare, there is a sudden, sharp crack—an instantaneous, wooden pulse of sound that reverberates through the woods. The temperature has been dropping, and the fibers of some large maple nearby have been torn apart by the immense pressure of a million tiny ice crystals. And then before the echo has faded, another tree answers from deeper in the woods. Sounds! Wonderful sounds! Not what I expected, but I am grateful nevertheless, and relieved to find I'm still in the land of the living.

It's time to seek the shelter of my tiny and crude but inviting one-room log cabin. I'll stoke the fire one more time before curling up in front of it, and I'll soon fall asleep listening to its reassuring crackle. Tomorrow, just as it did today, this little clearing will come alive with the slow, steady rhythm of a razor-sharp axe as it bites into the frozen trunk of yet another big old maple.

**1864**

Well, my little clearing didn't really amount to very much. It was ahead of its time, I suppose. The truth is, I couldn't take the isolation, and eventually I just gave up. The acre or so that I did manage to clear was soon overgrown with saplings. It was another twenty-five years, and another generation, before

anyone again attempted to clear this land. But once that work began, every year or two another field was added to the farm. Eventually this clearing was joined up with others, to become a more-or-less contiguous open space. Yes, it's taken a generation of hardship and toil, but it has brought about a wonderful transformation of the landscape. Now that about eighty per cent of the forest in these parts has been cut down, we can see far around this Garden of Eden, in every direction. What bush is left is mostly in the swampy areas and toward the back of the farm. There, we can get all the firewood and lumber we need, and every spring we tap for maple syrup. And it's a good place for the cattle to graze when the pasture dries up. Beyond that, it's mostly out-of-mind for most of us.

I still enjoy going to the bush, especially in early summer, to hear the Wood Thrush, Pewee, Red-eyed Vireo, Great-crested Flycatcher, Winter Wren, and many others. They continue to live there, much reduced in numbers, but not in the exuberance of their songs. Some, like the various kinds of woodpeckers, the Timberdoodle, partridge, and Passenger Pigeon don't sing, making their presence known by drumming or by sounds created with their wings. But nowadays the songs of forest birds have largely been replaced by those of birds of the field. Bobolinks do their amazing flights over every meadow. Savannah Sparrows and meadowlarks belt out their songs from convenient perches afforded by the ubiquitous cedar rail fences.

Around our farm buildings, we have American Robins, several species of swallows, Sparrow Hawks, Blue Jays, Chipping and Song Sparrows, kingbirds and phoebes, bluebirds, Disselfincks, orioles, and several species of blackbirds—the list seems endless. All these have adapted and benefited from the clearing of the land. Some of them probably were not even found in these parts until after the forest was cleared, and the rest are far more common now than they would have been a hundred years ago.

Thinking about all the changes I've witnessed over these fifty years, one thing I do miss is the sound of the axe. The frontier has moved several townships to the north and west. But the fact is, even there the axe has been pretty well replaced by the more efficient crosscut saw, so chopping isn't the common sound it once was. Anyway, the sounds of land clearing may have changed, but the result is much the same. What follows close behind are the sounds of domestication: cattle, sheep, pigs, chickens—and children . . .

lots of children! Out beyond the new clearings, cowbells, half-metallic, half-leather, provide a marker for the herd's whereabouts as they forage through their pasture and bush domain beyond the fences. Fences in frontier times were built to keep cattle out of fields; now that has all changed in these parts. All the fields and pastures are well fenced, to keep the critters in, and so cowbells are seldom heard anymore.

There are plenty of new sounds, though. In recent years, mechanization has started to make itself heard. The clatter of the horse-drawn hay rake is music to my ears. This new way of making hay means I sweat a lot less, and I have more time to daydream. Like here, where I've stopped to rest the horses at the far end of the field. Just now I can hear the whistle of the mid-day steam train pulling into Berlin,[3] a couple of miles to the south. The horses toss their heads and pivot their ears in the direction of the sound, as though sensing trouble. Sometimes, when the wind is just right, I can even smell it, and I suppose they can too . . . but that would be another story, I guess.

A few hundred years ago, when Aboriginal peoples had fields of corn, beans and squash in these parts, there would have been no bleating beasts or clucking chickens—just occasional human voices against an ever-changing melody of bird songs, squirrels, and chipmunks providing percussion and frogs, toads, and insects a steady drone, creating a differently and more richly orchestrated natural-world symphony than any we would hear today. Beyond these fields, hunters would have been tuned to every rustle and chirp for potential clues. What have those distant crows found? Why have the wood frogs suddenly stopped calling from that pond?

The dinner bell snaps me out of my daydream. Lunchtime already! You know, that big cast iron bell was the crowning touch on our new farmhouse, and the sweet sound of it is enough to make my mouth water.

**1914**

What is it about the fourteens, I wonder? War has broken out in Europe yet again; but here on our farm, those troubles seem very far away. Yes, farming is good here. It doesn't really seem that so much has changed in the past fifty years, yet I sense that much is about to change. For several decades now, a few of our neighbors have owned steam traction engines. These impressive

[3] Present-day Kitchener was known as Berlin until 1916.

beasts, as big as they are, scarcely make more noise than a horse—gentle huffing and puffing, and sometimes hissing and spitting, and occasionally a blast from the shrill whistle. But now there is a new creature appearing in the fields, stinkier and noisier than the steamers. Seeing what is taking place on our roads, I suppose it is just a matter of time until even the steamers will get replaced, just as many workhorses have already been. I just read in the newspaper the other day about how Henry Ford is using an "assembly line" to build his Model T automobiles, so I guess we'll be seeing—and hearing—a lot more of them soon. Well, there goes one now . . . and another one! More every day, it seems.

Now there are some among us—quite a few, really—who are not so sure that all this modernization is such a good idea. In fact, it has caused quite a rift in the church, and many in these parts have gone their separate way. They say the old ways are plenty good enough, and we are losing too much of those ways when we adopt every new-fangled invention that comes along. They say that the noise of the engines drowns out the songs of the birds, and when everything goes by so fast we lose touch with the land, and with our Maker. For myself, I can see their point all right, but I just don't know if it's possible to stop the clock or the 'advance' of civilization. Only time will tell, I suppose, who has made the better choice.

**1964**

As I stand looking across these fields, with the sun going down behind the hills to the west, I could pretend—almost believe—that nothing much has changed in the past 125 years. The fields are as green as ever. There is a Vesper Sparrow singing nearby, and a meadowlark makes one last flight over his grassy domain to announce his claim to it. Crickets chirp tirelessly, and a dragonfly whirs past my head. It's timeless, and peaceful. Well, almost peaceful. There is also the growl and clatter of a D9 Cat working overtime to move a pile of earth, behind me and just over the hill. If I were to turn around, I would see the sun glinting off the windows of some of the many new buildings that have sprung up just in the past few years. And with plans for many more . . . I've been told it won't be long. . . . I don't want to look.

You see, I've been living here in one of the old farmhouses that is about to be demolished to make way for the rapidly expanding University

of Waterloo campus. It was just a temporary arrangement. I knew that. But I did not anticipate the burden of all this history, the many things that I have inherited from the land, from this place, and that I'm powerless to preserve. The sounds of this meadow are already being drowned out and soon will be completely erased. Change is inevitable, necessary, and sometimes good, I suppose, but at what cost?

But why am I nostalgic for this landscape? It, after all, was the result of a massive change, every bit as momentous and devastating as this one. Majestic forests, thousands of years old, were wantonly destroyed—to make way for something new, something better. And it lasted all of 125 years? Who remembers the sounds of that forest? And who will remember the birds in these fields?

**2014**

It is the coldest, snowiest winter in many decades. I'm standing near a tiny remnant of woodland on the North Campus of the University. There is no real night-time here—everything is half illuminated in the perpetual yellowish twilight of the streetlights all around, and kept half-awake by the sound of traffic slogging through slushy streets. There is no darkness and no silence.

When the racket from a small herd of snowmobiles that has invaded the city is finally muffled behind a hill, I am surprised to hear excited yelping and yapping from somewhere down by Laurel Creek. A family of red foxes! Not something I recall having heard before, here in the city. It's a rollicking, boisterous outburst that gives every impression of being full of meaning and emotion. I so wish I understood what they were saying, and could join their party.

All too soon they fall silent, and it is then I realize that there are still more snow machines in the distance. They produce an irritating, high-pitched mechanical whine; but as I listen, it dawns on me that even this despicable noise pollution is loaded with information. And with a little effort I can decode it. The rise and fall of the volume and pitch, the contours of the sound, are drawn directly from the contours of the land. Every little hill, every bend in the trail, every creek crossing is being traced out in the sounds that reach my ear. There is an unexpected satisfaction that comes with this insight, although it does not translate into a desire to join them.

So, I am inclined to conclude that soundscapes are a highly subjective thing, as much as visual landscapes, or perhaps even more so. Standing here in this one place for two centuries, if I've learned anything at all from this little experiment, it is simply that I'm not, and can never expect to be, a detached, objective listener. Rather, I am inextricably a product of my time, my culture, and my values.[4]

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*Stooking – Old Order Mennonite Women. Waterloo County, Ontario, 1970.*
*Photo credit: Virgil Martin*

[4] Further sources for this work include: Michael D. Cadman, P. F. J. Eagles, and F. Helleiner, *Atlas of the Breeding Birds of Ontario* (Waterloo, ON: Univ. of Waterloo Press, 1987, www.birdsontario.org/atlas/atlasbook.jsp; Michael D. Cadman, D.A. Sutherland, G.G. Beck, D. Lepage, and A.R. Couturier, eds., *Atlas of the Breeding Birds of Ontario: 2001 – 2005* (Toronto: Bird Studies Canada; Environment Canada; Ontario Field Ornithologists; Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources; Ontario Nature, 2007), www.birdsontario.org/atlas/index.jsp?lang=en; and Virgil Martin, *The Early History of Jakobstettel* (St. Jacobs, ON: V. E. Martin, 1987).