History has recorded the names and deeds of many of Niagara’s daredevils. When our family lived in Niagara Falls, I got to know two of them personally. Our residence, just down the street from historic Lundy’s Lane, was the Drummond Apartments on Ferry Street. It was there, when I was a teenager, that I met Jean Lussier. His apartment was two stories above ours.

Lussier had gone over Canada’s Horseshoe Falls in an orange rubber ball on July 4, 1928, and was still, a few years later, trying to make a living from having performed that stunt.

He showed me his scrapbooks: two huge volumes filled with newspaper clippings of his daredevil exploits. One picture that greatly impressed me was of Lussier hurling himself off the highest building in Boston using a pair of wings he designed. He simply glided to earth. According to the clipping, he did it twice.

Lussier had his rubber ball on display at Falls View. There, for a price, he allowed tourists to have their picture taken with him, with the orange ball in the background. Lussier could never decide whether he made more money on the Canadian side or the American side. Being an American citizen, he finally moved to Niagara Falls, New York, to stay.

The other daredevil I met was William “Red” Hill, the famous river man. When he entered his steel barrel and took it through the rapids in 1930, my chums and I were there to see it. We watched as the barrel shot through the water at an estimated speed of sixty kilometres an hour. There were times when it shot six metres or more into the air. When it splashed down, it disappeared under the water, only to reappear downstream, shooting into the air again.

When the barrel reached the whirlpool, it circled slowly, alternately pushed near the shore then sucked back into the vortex. During the quiet times, Hill opened a hatch and peered out and waved a paddle at the onlookers.

We boys quickly made our way to the shore of the whirlpool. We were there when one of Hill’s sons, wearing a bathing suit, tied a long rope around his waist, and swam out and grasped the river man’s outstretched hand as the barrel drifted by. How gladly Hill held on to his son and hugged him. Several men pulled them and the barrel ashore.

While standing nearby, I heard one of the men say, “Red, didn’t I see you starting to take your clothes off?” Hill replied, “Yes! The barrel was starting to leak and I was going to swim for it the next time around. I knew it would sink if I waited any longer!”

It was after that daredevil stunt that
I met Red Hill. He was a personal friend of Bill Burridge, my father’s brother. The meeting took place one summer evening when my uncle, father, my sister Beatrice, and I made a call on the Hill home.

Hill was out on the front lawn with his barrel. Next to Hill’s barrel was the one-ton oak and steel bumper barrel that the Greek, George Stathakis, took over the falls in 1930. Riding with him was his 105-year-old turtle named Sonny Boy. Because the barrel was so heavy, it was trapped under the falls for fourteen hours, and water leaked into it. The man did not survive. The turtle did.

Hill allowed Beatrice and I to peek inside the barrel and see the turtle. Then we were given the privilege of crawling inside Hill’s barrel to inspect it. Visitors had to pay a fee to have their pictures taken with Hill and the barrel, but we had our inspection free.

A few months later, we boys were swimming in the river at the foot of Ellis Street. This was an area above the rapids, where the river had developed a backto. We swam there often. We were getting dressed when I heard a man’s voice behind me, “Why are you getting dressed? Why don’t you swim out there and get that body?”

I turned around and there stood Red Hill. I asked, “What body?” “That body,” he replied as he pointed it out to me, a body floating in the water near the American shore. He had spotted it near the falls and had followed its progress as he trod the Canadian shore. He later recovered a woman’s body from the whirlpool.

As for swimming across the river, defying the currents, bringing the body to the Canadian side of the river— at sixteen years of age— I wasn’t remotely interested. I’m no daredevil.

By Cecil E. Burridge, a retired minister living in Barrie, Ontario.

Have you had a personal experience with the great characters or momentous events of Canadian history? If you would like to submit a story for possible publication, send it to <editors@historysociety.ca> with YourStory in the subject line, or write to Your Story, c/o The Beaver, 478-167 Lombard Avenue, Winnipeg, MB, R3B 0E6. For further information please see our editorial guidelines at <www.thebeaver.ca>.