

The Merrickville and District Historical Society

NEWSLETTER

Summer 2010

Volume 8 Number 2

RBC Blue Water Advisory Panel Donation

The Merrickville & District Historical Society was pleased and grateful to receive this spring a donation from the RBC Blue Water Advisory Panel in the amount of \$2500 to be used in our programs. The RBC Blue Water Advisory Panel grant program supports global solutions for freshwater preservation, conservation and access in Canada and around the world. Merrickville resident George Yap is a member of this panel and the Program Director for WaterCan, a Canadian charity dedicated to ending poverty by helping the world's poorest people gain access to clean water. For his work done with WaterCan and with the Blue Water panel, George Yap was entitled to present \$2500 to the non-profit organization of his choice. George chose the Merrickville & District Historical Society.



George Yap

For a few years in the early '90's George Yap was an active member of our Executive Committee and was absolutely essential as we developed our Long Range Plan. Logical, focused and knowledgeable, he kept us on the track as we sought to clarify our organizational purpose and priorities with questions such as "Do you really want to be property owners or even managers with all that implies?" Or simply the admonition to "stay focused".. The Historical Society is grateful to the RBC Blue Water Advisory Panel and to George Yap for this recognition and award and assures the benefactors it will be put to good purpose.

***** BULLETIN ! *****

After huge effort by many volunteers and with the current help of student Mark Simonyi we are now able to offer you access to the thousands of records and images contained in the Historical Society data bank. Why not drop into the Library and check out the amazing compilation of records and images accumulated over many years in our archives. More on this later.

Merrickville's "hippies"

At the height of Merrickville's prosperity in 1859, Aaron Merrick, son of Village founder William Mirick built the massive three story stone building on the south west corner of Main and St Lawrence as a testament to the Village's commercial promise. Following its acquisition by Ephraim Tallman in the 1860's that promise was fulfilled as it housed commercial offices, a bank and Tallman's general store operated by the Tallman's well into the 20th century.

It now operates as Miriks Landing Store and Village Mews and again houses a number of attractive shops and the popular Yellow Canoe restaurant.

However over its long history its success has not been continuous. In fact, as with much of the Village structures during the 1930's it fell into a period of neglect, indeed



Aaron Merrick Block c 1859

abandonment. This however led to arguably its most critical, interesting and usually ignored period of use. After decades of neglect, the building - then nicknamed the "elephant" - was purchased with a three-year mortgage from the Ontario Heritage Foundation by Merrick Block Development and Management Inc., a non-profit corporation. The original vision was to create an environmental information centre and workshop.

The OHF, concerned for the condition of the historic building, arranged for the purchasers, to provide a promise of labour to

restore the building in lieu of a down payment. In addition mortgage payments of \$400 a month were arranged.

For a number of years the original twenty member co-op with the help of Katimavik honoured their commitment spending thousands of hours restoring the windows (which had been filled in with concrete blocks), vastly upgrading the insulation in the walls and ceilings, re-pointing the exterior stone walls and creating three apartments on the third floor. On the ground floor a craft-cum-furniture shop was opened. After installation of wood burning furnaces for heating, the building became home for the half the co-op members.

By the mid eighties, with membership diminished and a conventional mortgage due and difficult to arrange. the decision was made to sell the property. Listed at \$99,000 it sold for \$77,500.

There is little doubt that without this occupancy in the '80's, by the "Merrickville Hippies" as they came to be known by some curious village residents, this commanding heritage structure would not have survived. But perhaps though, the most important legacy left from this period is in the form of the numerous skilled craftsmen and women who continue to live in the Village and contribute to its diversity of skills in arts, culture and architectural restoration.

Brenda Carter

This Spring Merrickville lost one of its pillars of the artist community and the Historical Society lost a true friend. Brenda Carter passed away after a lengthy illness but leaves a body of work that will ensure her immortality. Brenda was a life member of the Historical Society and a regular attendee at our meetings.

In 2005 she donated a print to the Society as a prize in a fundraising activity at the Blockhouse museum. The limited edition full coloured and numbered print, entitled, "In the Garden: Ruby Throated Hummingbird" was raffled off over the summer in the Blockhouse. It was a particularly precious print as it depicted a humming bird feeding at a hollyhock taken from a photo by Brenda in the garden of Diana Beresford-Kroeger.



Gerard Phillips & Brenda Carter

Our sincere sympathy goes out to Gerard Phillips and the many friends that will miss her.

Merrickville's Famous Woollen Mill

Following the American Revolution the first Loyalists arrived in Canada, first settling first along the St Lawrence and then, in the closing years of the 18th century working their way north searching for new land and opportunity. They were closely followed in the early 1800's by settlers from Europe the bulk of who were Irish, Scottish, and English. The often inhospitable terrain and environment had the new settlers fending for themselves, causing them to develop a wide variety of skills and knowledge.

The fortunate ones settled along rivers which gave them arable land and at least some access to adjacent neighbouring communities. In the Lower Rideau Settlement, a few resourceful early settlers such as William Mirick, Rufas Andrews, and the Burritts saw the opportunity to harness the power of the river to provide for mills which would serve the needs of the growing number of settlers. These pioneers were shortly followed by the first settlers who arrived with only a few implements, perhaps an ox, cow and chickens and only the most basic supplies. The rush to build shelter before the harsh winter was the first priority.

Hastily built drafty rude log shanties were barely adequate and were clad as soon as possible with cut boards or replaced with squared logs. Thus, the wily William Mirick's first mill was devoted to shaping logs, cutting planks and making shingles.



The first grains from the land in most cases were thrashed on the farm but soon, as production increased, came the need or at least convenience of using local grist mills to obtain flour and feed. Again Messrs Mirick, Andrews and Burritt were happy to oblige.

While much of the land adjacent to the river was highly arable, those settlers who found themselves "inland" were much less fortunate. To clear, till and produce harvest on the dry rocky uneven land was a challenge only the most hardy and determined could accomplish. Sheep were another matter. For them and other livestock, the land was generally agreeable.

Although home spinning and weaving were common pioneering practices, the first stage, the conversion of raw fleece into suitable material was a difficult and time consuming process involving sorting, scouring, raking and washing. Much better was to send the raw fleece to a "carding mill" and get in return sorted and cleaned carded wool suitable for spinning and weaving. And as the flocks grew, the surplus fleece also generated income for trade goods.

As early as 1817, William Mirick had erected a carding mill to serve these local needs, but by the late 1840's the opportunity was seen to expand the operation into a full milling operation for manufacturing woollen goods at all stages. By this time cloth making machinery was available in the US and Britain and with an eye to future woollen milling, entrepreneur Stephen H. Mirick, son of William, in 1848, made the significant investment in a full scale woollen mill and factory, the first in the area.

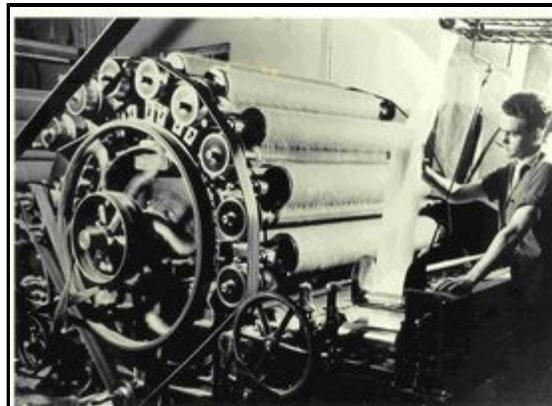
With improved technology and innovation and with the opening of export markets, the mill operated with growing success until the death of Stephen Merrick in 1861, after which the mill continued to be operated by the family but it missed Stephen's vision and dynamic presence.

Thomas Watchorn, originally from Ireland, was an experienced miller who had worked for Gilbert Cannon in his mills in Almonte and had family connections to the Merricks. With the coming of the railway to Merrickville he saw significant growth prospects and by first leasing in 1874 and then buying the Merricks Woolen Mill from Henry Merrick in 1885, Thomas Watchorn and his brother Robert became entrepreneurs in their own right.

With renewed energy the Watchorn brothers succeeded in improving and growing the business. They worked to encourage local sheep farming, and used the wool to produce, flannels, sheeting, tweeds, and yarn and in later years blankets and sheets. In 1912 Thomas' son Robert Watchorn changed the name of the mill to Watchorn and Company. In 1891 it was sold and continued to change hands several times over the next years, while remaining in the Watchorn family.

Its last successful era was during the war years when it produced woollen goods for overseas. It was hard work but the many Village employees who worked there were very loyal to the Company. A long time Merrickville resident recalls:

"we worked regular ten hours a day. . . Sometimes we would have to go back and work a couple of hours after supper, to get out whatever the quota was. If it had to be shipped, if it had to go at a certain time, we would have to go back and do it... I've spent many a two hours after super, hemming blankets and helping to pack them."



**Collies Carding Mill, c 1940, Appelton
© Almonte Textile Museum**

After the war the business began to decline. Cotton, not easily procured in Merrickville, was replacing wool as the desired clothing material, and the mill eventually closed its doors in 1954. It was demolished in 1976 leaving only a pile of stone rubble and the still visible faint inscription, above the original entrance, "S.H. Mirick, 1848" to remind us of the great enterprise that was Merrickville's famous woollen mill.



**Inscription still visible above original mill entrance
"S. H. Mirick 1848"**

Council 1860 Re-enactors



Merrickville Councillors and re-enactors celebrate the 150th anniversary of the Village Council

This year marks the 150th anniversary of the first meeting of the newly incorporated village of Mirickville. (it did not change to Merrickville until 1862). In tribute to the occasion the Merrickville-Wolford Council re-enacted the occasion in a procession from the Old Town Hall to the location of the first Council meeting in the City Hotel, now the Goose and Gridiron. There a re-enactment of the first Council meeting (sans cognac) with Doug Struthers modestly accepting as Aaron Mirick, the first position of Reeve of Mirickville.

Published by The Merrickville & District Historical Society
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