

The Merrickville and District Historical Society NEWSLETTER

Spring 2005

Volume 3 Number 1

Eat, Drink and meet Mary

The Historical Society's annual spring dinner was again a great success. Over sixty attendees enjoyed the excellent dinner served in the historic Baldachin 3rd floor Ballroom and followed by a sincerely engaging presentation by renowned author and broadcaster Mary Cook. A gifted storyteller Mary Cook grew up in the Ottawa Valley in the 30's and has published several books in which she shares her childhood recollections and the earthy wisdom of those hard times.



Mary Cook with door prize winner Irene Briggs

But, this night she told us of her quest for stories for her long standing CBC broadcast series. Such as the search for "Great Canadians". For Mary, these were not famous dignitaries or Politicians but ordinary folks with extraordinary lives. Such as the mother from Chapleau in Quebec who successfully raised nineteen children, *all boys!* And we sat on her shoulder, next to the Angel that often guided her on her travels. Such as the time when returning to the Nothcote side Road after many years absence found herself disoriented. So much had changed since the time she grew up there. She stopped at a house to enquire about a favourite "aunt", Rosanne Presler, only to find herself at the door of her childhood friend, Nellie, daughter of the woman she was seeking.

Mary Cook with door prize winner Irene Briggs The evening concluded with a door prize, a copy of Mary Cook's latest book, "A Bubble Off Plumb", won by Irene Briggs, who happily obtained an autograph from the Carlton Place author.

***** did you know ? *****

Carpenters will recognize the Ottawa Valley expression "bubble off plumb" as referring to someone at least slightly eccentric. Not quite there.

The Burritts are Coming

This summer will see the return to Burritt's Rapids of some 150 members of the extended Burritts family. They will come from all over North America and will be arriving in the "Lower Rideau Settlement" some 212 years after Stephen Burritt founded the settlement named for him. As well as the Burritts other Lower Rideau pioneer family descendents including the Hurds, Merricks, Nichols, Youngs & Mullens will be returning.

The reunion is being organized for July 8, 9 and 10 by Edwina Mullen, a descendant of Daniel Burritt and Sarah Collins. You may obtain more information from her at Box 652, Stittsville K2S 1A7, or by phone at 613 836-8395.

It may be timely to tell a little bit about yet another amazing pioneer founding family in

our district. The following information is drawn from the publication "Burrirt's Rapids - 1793-1993 A Scrapbook, - written by Olivia Mills and Renee Smith" and other sources.

Burrirt History

The Burrirts, like the Merricks, were of Welsh extraction and had come out to the Massachusetts Bay Colony in the early 1600's. They too had been frontiersmen and at the outbreak of the American Revolution the Burrirts had lived in Vermont.

Also like the Merrick's, Daniel Burrirt Sr. and his sons Stephen and Adoniram were unwilling to throw their support behind the American rebels and as a consequence, in 1776 a Vermont Court of Confiscation ordered seizure of Daniel Burrirt's farm at Arlington, Vermont. His sons Stephen and Adoniram were arrested and jailed, but with the help of an American guard friend, managed to escape. Stephen fled to St. Jean, Quebec while Adoniram made his way back to his family, who were in hiding.

Stephen joined the British Army in Quebec as a member of the famous Rogers Rangers and after his discharge came up the St. Lawrence on a trading voyage. As a U.E Loyalist, he received a land grant and drew Lot 29, Conc. 1 in Augusta Township, where his father, four brothers and six sisters eventually joined him. Here Daniel Sr. died in 1856, aged 97.

It was in Augusta that Stephen no doubt learned of the exploits of Roger Stevens and William Merrick and became enthused with the prospects of establishing his own mill on the Rideau. It seems altogether likely that William Merrick's decision to explore the possibilities of becoming established north of Elizabethtown had been discussed with Steven Burrirt for they were both from similar backgrounds and about the same age. In 1793 Stephen Burrirt with his brothers trekked north striking the Rideau in the vicinity of Cox Creek (the former Rideau correctional farm).

Here they constructed a raft and followed the current of the Rideau another two miles until they came to a series of rapids. Here they landed and in 1793 Stephen Burrirt was granted Lot 26, Marlborough, near a rapids just downstream from his father-in-law, Roger Stevens. Stevens with William Merrick had built the first mill on the Rideau some three years previously. The land settled on either side of the Rideau River was at this time generally known as The Lower Settlement.

Here Stephen and his wife Martha built a log cabin and later had born a son Edmund, the first white child born along the Rideau in December 1793. Stephen's brothers Edmund and young Daniel settled in the area and the Community began to grow. Other settlers were attracted by arable land and the availability of the mills in the district. The canal in 1832 linked it to the outside world. By the middle of the 19th century, Burrirt's Rapids had a population of 400 and boasted all of the services, including a blacksmith, general store, tannery, tailor, carriage shop and of course, a well patronized pub. Like many self sufficient Ontario communities of the time, it was a bustling successful centre of activity for the surrounding area.

Stephen Burrirt opened the first post office in the area in 1820 and became a member of the first parliament of Upper Canada. In 1866, T. A. Kidd went to work in the post office, and for the next 80 years, the position of postmaster in Burrirt's Rapids was held by a member of the Kidd family.

******* did you know ? *******

Merrickville & Burrirt's rapids have more than proximity in common. Stephen Burrirt was married to Martha Stevens, daughter of William Merrick's partner, Roger Stevens, and Edmund, their son, born in 1793 became a doctor, practicing in Smith's Falls. Edmund's daughter Mary married Aaron Merrick and together they built and lived in the stately home at the south end of Merrickville; the home later to be owned by Harry McLean.

or

*that on the grounds of Burrirt's Rapids' Anglican Christ Church a cairn records the work of the Communities early pioneers. The stone coping on this cairn came from the Burrirt family farm in Vermont.**

or

*that the "Village Blacksmith" immortalized by American poet Longfellow, was Elihu Burrirt, a cousin of Stephen Burrirt.**

Reference: "the Story of the Lower Rideau Settlement" by Virginia & Max Martyn, based on a 1965 presentation to the Grenville Historical Society by Miss Anna Grier.

Shake, Rattle and Wreck ... editorial comment

I am sure everyone has noticed the significantly increased volume of heavy trucks using the main streets of Merrickville Village. Not only are these a noise annoyance and a safety hazard, (it is fortunate no one has been struck as the behemoths rush through the pedestrian crowded downtown area), but they are also a real threat to the heritage structures of our Village. Fully two thirds of the thirty-three designated buildings in Merrickville are located on Mill Street, Main Street East or St Lawrence, the routes most subjected to this heavy traffic.

And these buildings are at risk. Whether frame, stone or brick all of these older structures rest on masonry foundations which were not made to sustain the forces imposed on them by present heavy truck traffic. Downtown, the sidewalks which abut the buildings unfortunately convey destructive vibration directly to the foundation. (Have a look at the front stone walls of the Gad's Hill Place) This is not speculation. A recently completed engineering study confirmed damage is being caused to the masonry structures along St Lawrence. Homes build on bedrock are also vulnerable as vibrations are readily transmitted through these dense substrates.

There seem to be several fundamental causes for this increasing problem. And it is an increased and increasing problem. Consolidated warehousing is one cause. (Loblaws has just announced closure of several depots). Whereas in earlier times products and produce were delivered in small vans from local depots, now massive trailer trucks are loaded in Kingston or Ottawa and make deliveries to all towns between. They are so large they can barely turn in village streets. And it did not help when the canal swing bridge in Merrickville was replaced a few years ago. It is now unfortunately suitable to support the weight and vibration of the 24 wheelers en route to and from 401/416.

As always, it easier to recognize a problem than to resolve it. The Village's authority over the roads through our streets is limited since the County has principal jurisdiction over them. But still, there are things we could do. Firstly we could ask the OPP to enforce the laws we already have. (Have you ever seen traffic travel the posted 20 km/h over the swing bridge? Have you ever seen radar speed enforcement there, or anywhere else lately?). Other Communities have posted signs indicating increased fines in community areas. Why can't we do the same?

A traffic pattern study to put substance to these speculations would seem to be an essential first step. And while local operations are not the principal offenders, it would help if they would direct their trucks to use Reid Street. This would not be a welcome alternative for folks there, but at least the new homes have contemporary foundations and appropriate set backs. It may seem these matters are outside of the jurisdiction of the Historical Society, but, all matters threatening to damage not only our historic buildings but the heritage character of our Village are matters which I feel should concern us.

- John Cowan

Remembering Joni Robinson

All communities have their share of memorable characters. Often considered loveably eccentric at the time, these folk becomes the stuff of legends as time passes. Such a character was Jonas Robinson, Joni to his friends. Tall and erect always properly attired, even when painting the neighborhood scenes which would ultimately make him famous, Jonas stood out from the crowd. In celebration of Jonas's life and work, Elinor Inglis arranged a retrospective of his whimsical depictions of local scenes. Some fifty of his paintings were loaned by residents of the Merrickville area for the tribute in Elinor's Moth Gallery.

A special treat was to hear from Mervin Robinson, Jonas' nephew, who shared with an overflow crowd, a personal insight of his Uncle and details of his past. At the time he created them, no-one including Joni considered his paintings of great value. As Mervin Robinson said, "Jonas would give away his paintings or sell them for minimal prices of \$2.00 to \$10.00 each approximately." But in time, they became recognized, not only as fine examples of naive or "folk" art, but as important records of local history; scenes no longer in existence. The Watchorn Woolen Mill, the Rideau King, the Percival Foundry in its prime we will not see again.



Mervin Robinson

Mike Laurie an Ottawa dealer in antiques and

folk art was one of the first to recognize the merit of Robinson's work. He first saw a Jonas painting in a shop window in Ottawa in the early 70's. Struck by its simple charm he tracked down the painter to Merrickville. Here he befriended Jonas and began collecting his work and was instrumental in having Jonas Robinson's work included in the Ottawa Canadian Museum of Civilization collection.

Mervin Robinson indicated Jonas would not only have been amazed but embarrassed at the present prices achieved for his work. Said nephew Mervin, "They are currently selling between \$300 to \$600 each" if you can find one. When the audience was asked by Mike Laurie how many folks had pictures by Jonas Robinson, practically everybody in the room raised their hands. With new knowledge of his reputation, many who acquired his work for the whimsy of the painter as well as the art, find themselves with not only treasured, but valuable remembrances of this memorable Merrickville "Character".



The Watchorn Woolen Mill, by Jonas Robinson



The Percival Foundry, by Jonas Robinson

******* did you know ? *******

All you folks living on Colborne Street in Merrickville no doubt know it was named after Sir John Colborne, Lieutenant Governor of Ontario from 1828 to 1836. But did you know that in 1828, the people of Merrickville, known then as Merrick's Mills, perhaps in reaction to the prominence and dominance of the Merrick family, decided at a public meeting held at the home of L. P. Loucks to change the name of the Settlement to "Colborne" in honour of the newly appointed Lieutenant Governor. But they were too slow. By the time of their application it was discovered there were two other "Colbornes" and so the idea was dropped. Instead they settled for a south end street named after the popular Lieutenant Governor.

Apologies

In the last news it was mentioned that early schoolhouse S. S. No 1, Montague which Lenore Newman attended as a child, was destroyed by fire. In fact says Lenore, the schoolhouse was first moved to allow for the widening of the highway, then carted into Smiths Falls where it served as part of someone's home. Somehow, this seems a better fate. Does anyone know where it is now?

Blockhouse Opening June 18, 2005



1000 Island Islands River Heritage Society deliver a cannon volley as they

This year the Blockhouse Museum official opening will be on Saturday June 18. Mayor Douglas Struthers will cut the Ribbon at 1:00 pm after which the winners of the school essay contest will be announced and prizes awarded. All attendees will then be welcomed into the Blockhouse Museum. As well as viewing the exhibits, you will be able to meet some of the Village hookers, (rugs that is), as well as seeing demonstrations of other pioneer crafts and meet heritage celebrants from neighbouring historical societies.

The opening will feature a return to the canal of the Thousand Islands Bateau and its rambunctious crew. The bateau is an authentic reproduction of the crafts that engaged in skirmishes along the St

approach the Blockhouse canal docks, June 2003 Lawrence shore during the war if 1812. In the evening we will again celebrate the opening of the Blockhouse season with a fundraising reception, at which the winners of this year's Heritage awards will be presented.

Volunteers to help out with Society activities are very much welcomed and, if you are interested, please contact Pat Molson at 269-4092. Better still, on May 14 we will be conducting our spring cleanup of the Blockhouse. Getting rid of the dust and cobwebs. Come on along and sweep with us.

Nominations for Heritage Award of Merit

Three years ago the Merrickville & District Historical Society began a programme to recognize individuals, organizations and businesses that have made a significant contribution to maintaining the heritage and history of our area. Since then some 17 Community members have been recognized for their outstanding contributions to the preservation of our heritage.

To submit an application for the 2005 Heritage Award of Merit, please send your suggestion by April 30 to:
Merit Award, MDHS Box 294, Merrickville, ON, K0G 1N0

Trillium to the Rescue !

On April 7, 2005 the Historical Society received notice of the approval of our application to the ONTARIO TRILLIUM FOUNDATION for a grant to be applied to the preservation of and improved access to, our precious archival records. The grant is in the amount of \$14,800 and together with a portion of the Thomas Manning bequest, will provide close to \$20,000 to apply to this critically important project. The first stages will involve organizing and indexing the archival material and ensuring its safe preservation. The collection then will be transferred to digital format. Not only will this preserve these important historical records, but, through computer technology, they will be made much more accessible to those interested in our fascinating heritage. Kudos to Historical Society Treasurer, Andrew McKay for leading the application process to this success, and thanks to the Ontario Trillium Foundation for this important grant.

Note: Most of the snippets of history in this Newsletter come from MDHS archival material. For instance:

******* did you know ? *******

The first regulation Baden Powell boy scout Troup in North America was started in 1908 in, you guessed it, Merrickville, then a busy Village of 900 people.

Membership Matters

The annual membership fees for 2005 are now due. To continue your support as an annual member, and to ensure you continue to be updated on our activities, please send your cheque for \$5 per person or \$10 per family to the address below. Thanks for your help.

Note: due to the cost involved, and in fairness to paid-up members, we will in future send this newsletter only to individuals whose dues are current.

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John Cowan, Editor

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PO Box 294
Merrickville, Ontario K0G 1N0

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