

BROCK'S BANTER: Left Behind

By Brock Weir

They were an unusual sight in the middle of a sea of colourful ceramics.

Near the northeast corner of the Blue Gallery at the Aurora Cultural Centre stands a small display of miniature oil cans. They stood out in a room showing every dazzling effect different glazing and firing techniques can have on humble clay hauled out of the ground below us. But, these were simple and stark.

The colour of the cans ? or lack thereof ? wasn't the only thing that set Heather Smit's display apart, but the seemingly random numbers etched into their sides as well. I was pondering the meaning of the two sets of numbers borne by each can at the grand opening of 'From Earth to Fire', the latest show by Aurora's Pinetree Potters' Guild, when Mayor Dawe approached the same piece, seeming to ponder the same thing. Soon enough, this became a collective thought for many in the room.

The meaning, as you will see on our Arts & Culture page this week, was deceptively simple. The gist: one number represented the weight of the clay before it met its maker in the kiln, with the second marking its current weight after the firing process.

The message, she said, was people often lose sight of what is ultimately lost in the creative process while keeping an eye on what will be left behind.

What's left behind is, of course, very important in our world. 'AUC: Alive?', another show in the same building, serves as a remarkable testament to what was left behind after Aurora United Church was obliterated by fire this spring. Continuing on a theme, Council could approve a new curator as early as this spring to turn an expert eye to the care of thousands upon thousands of artefacts that bear mute testimony to everything our forebears couldn't take with them.

On the flipside, students into this fall will be working with representatives of the Aurora Historical Society, the Senior Wish Association, and Hollandview Trail Retirement Community, to preserve the less tangible, reviving and recording oral histories while they still have the chance.

This is a wonderful idea, to be sure, and an idea which will bear fruit for many generations to come, but as a significant milestone approaches this Civic Holiday Monday, I can't help but be reflective.

Those ? and that ? which have been left behind have always fascinated me. It might stem back to an early age when, like a truffle pig, I developed a weird sense of zeroing in on large spikes left over in the ground from the radial railway, which once traversed through Aurora and Newmarket.

(Sadly, I have grown out of this talent!)

Studying in Ottawa, it was always a particular pleasure strolling around the city and happening upon a forgotten corner, a foundation stone, or a street address with even a remote connection to the assignment on hand.

This feeling continued back in Aurora. The first example that comes to mind is a tour through Wells Street Public School a couple of years ago as its new owners did the preliminary work in transforming the building into lofts.

As I roamed the eerily quiet halls, I was struck by that old cliché of 'If these walls could talk?' and could almost hear the echo of generations of Aurora kids who came of age in those halls, making lasting friendships, celebrating a team victory or a great mark, sulking after failing to make the grade on a quiz, or maybe stealing a first kiss.

Posters and teaching aids were still taped precariously to the walls, names were still written on the blackboards, and a handful of shavings were still dangling from the rotary blades of hand-cranked pencil sharpeners. It is the same feeling I get when walking around some of the heritage areas of Aurora.

Leaving the politics of heritage aside (let's face it, we can all use a breather on that one!) it is clear that heritage (and the significance thereof) is all in the eye of the beholder.

Some examples are almost universally held as symbols of architectural beauty, while others can divide the masses between 'quaint' and 'eyesore' but as the milestone approaches, I'm finding that beauty in places I otherwise wouldn't give a second glance.

LET'S GO BACK TO THOSE WALLS?

Today, many of these walls are now bearing witness to commerce, business, and the daily routines of professionals. Others are still serving their original purpose, providing four walls to new, growing families, while fully prepared to battle those same sands of time, protecting their residents as they grow old gracefully together.

But, as computers power down for the long weekend and many families head to the cottage or for some family daytrips, 100 years ago this week these walls bore witness to something significantly different.

The individuals those walls sheltered were not necessarily looking for a weekend escape. Canada was on the brink of joining Great Britain in entering a little European skirmish that would be known all-too-soon as the 'War to End All Wars'.? As mom or dad fire up the barbeque with a cold beer in hand this Monday, it will be 100 years to the day these families that have come and gone were just beginning to grapple with the very idea of Canada being at war. Their eager young sons, having picked up the morning paper, could have dropped the proverbial bomb that they wanted to go off to Europe for what was sure to be a bit of adventure in France, Belgium, and other locales, before tucking into a nice, home cooked meal, not necessarily realising the enormity of their decision. Did their parents, sitting around the dining room table, share that same sense of excitement, adventure and patriotism, or did they have firsthand experience ? whether they themselves participated in the Boer War, or experienced conflicts in other parts of the world before coming to Canada ? with the realities of war? As the families of today collapse into their beds after an exhausting long weekend of fun, what conversations were going on within those walls a century ago as the sun went down? Were two brothers, sharing a room, trying to out-macho each other with grandiose ideas of how they could personally stick it to the Kaiser, or could one brother be giving the other, wavering brother a pep-talk into doing their patriotic duty for King and Country? Did the façade, so bravely put on by the mother during dinner, and perhaps through an agonizing evening relaxing and chatting to the neighbours from the front porch, crumble as soon as the bedroom door clicked closed for the night? Or might she have gone to bed beaming with pride over her sons' determination, dreaming of the honour they would bring to the family coming out of what was supposed to be just a short conflict? And what about dad? Was he left to comfort his wife with a sense of bravado, tales of his own exploits, or a sense of duty? If he was of a certain age, did he have any pangs of jealousy that his sons could be going off to put their hands on a rung of glory that had always been unattainable to him? Or did he harbour any secret pain, stemming from his own experiences of war, or even handed down from his own father, which, due to the societal pressures of the day, he would never truly be able to express? Alas, we will never know, but spare a moment's thought for these silent witnesses and the individuals who left them behind.