

Historical Society fostered new sense of community identity, says Founder

By Brock Weir

In the second part of our interview with Dr. Leslie Oliver, founder of the Aurora Historical Society 50 years ago this year, he reflects on the foundations of the Society itself.

There are three key ways to tackle history, according to Dr. Leslie Oliver, who founded the Aurora Historical Society 50 years ago this year.

These three principles are what have guided him through his lifelong passion for where we have come from and where we are going.

Overall, it is most important to understand what history teaches and what it tells, he says, but one way to tackle that broad, if not intimidating, starting point is looking at history simply as the good old days. Another view is to look at history as a story of human progress. The third, and one he personally subscribes to, is we're living in history right now and contribute to it every day.

Dr. Oliver has certainly lived in history, and undoubtedly contributed to it. When asked what inspired him to form the Aurora Historical Society in 1963, he points to a snapshot taken by his father of Lester B. Pearson while Prime Minister sitting at a social event marking Aurora's Centennial sitting next to a very dapper looking gentleman.

Both men in the picture were graduates of Victoria College at the University of Toronto, and the man sitting beside him was Aurora's E.H. Clarke.

"These were two very erudite gentlemen for the time," says Dr. Oliver. "They were very liberal thinkers. They had a very profound understanding of humanity. They were guys who had been through the First World War, the greatest depression the world had ever known and they said there had to be a better way. We all know where that got Pearson, but Ernest did his things locally and he was a seminal influence on me."

40 years his junior, Dr. Oliver looked on Mr. Clarke as a grandfatherly figure. When he found himself saying something about life, he made it a point to sit up and listen. One of the things he said was, "Leslie, what this Town needs is a historical society!" and Dr. Oliver took the ball and ran with it.

As Pearson and Clarke "were very liberal thinkers", society at the time was also largely swinging in that direction. It proved to be the perfect point to launch the Aurora Historical Society (AHS) as there were great changes ahead "what Dr. Oliver describes as the "Citizen Participation Movement."

This was a seminal movement which shaped the role of historical societies in the province, he says.

"Council meetings were historically held behind closed doors and I remember trying to talk to Councillors back in the 1960s and you couldn't get near them," he recalls. "So many things came together. There was interest in the Centennials of Canada and Aurora, and all those events coalesced and produced a whole new kind of culture."

"People were all of a sudden interested in history, community, community identity, and national identity. It didn't blow up overnight, but the effects were cumulative and quite dramatic between what happened in the 1960s and 1980s."

During that 20 year period, the AHS matured in Dr. Oliver's estimation and the understanding of its associated collections also matured. There was also a heightened degree of activism on the part of AHS members. One of the first events to see this sense of purpose in action were plans to widen Yonge Street from two to four lanes, plowing through the Yonge and Wellington corridor.

?I was part of a demonstration that closed traffic on Wellington and Yonge in the late 1960s,? he says. ?We were very active in saying you can't do this and here are the reasons why. There was a lot of heat generated, the AHS was very much at the centre of all that and it really paid off. From the vantage point of 2013, it is hard to imagine what things were like in the 1960s and early 1970s. It was a whole different world and all that advocacy produced results.?

These results included legislation allowing municipalities to form local architectural conservation and advisory committees, efforts which Dr. Oliver says computed and changed community life as a whole.

More fruits of their labour include the preservation of what is now the Aurora GO Station.

?The Historical Society has been a significant driving force in the development of this Town for the last 50 years, which most people don't understand and don't really care,? he says.

?But we're in fundamentally new times. Those functions that a not-for-profit volunteer organization did in the 60s and 70s were so damned successful that the Town has taken over those functions and made them staff functions. We have planners, we have a heritage planner, and all that stuff is now in-house.

?As a society, we have contributed fundamentally to a new understanding of community identity and what community is all about. Now we have got to move onto something else.?