TIME TRAVELLER'S DIARY: Canada's Birthday Town

By Michelle Johnson

You may have heard that Aurora is Canada's Birthday Town, but do you know how that came to be? Let's travel back to 1967? Momentum from Canada's Centennial celebrations was building across the country and the very successful Montreal Expo ignited a patriotic fever that was sweeping the nation.

In Aurora, Canada's centennial celebrations consisted of a four-day program of events. The theme was ?March on Centennial Fun? and was inspired by the main Saturday event ? a re-enactment of the 1837 Lloydtown March. What might be surprising for today's reader is that this took place during the middle of June, not July 1st. At the time, July 1st was just a regular day without fan fair and jovial festivities. Enter the residents of Aurora's Richardson Drive who had their own ideas about how to celebrate Canada's Centennial.

A few days before July 1st, residents of Richardson Drive formed a committee, headed by Norm Stewart, and arranged an evening full of activities that would celebrate Canada's birthday ? on the actual day. The festivities began at 7 p.m. with a children's costume parade and races. Almost every home on the street was decorated with Christmas lights or Centennial themed displays. The street party was repeated the following year and by 1969 the whole town wanted to participate in celebrating July 1st!

On June 9, 1969, Town Council approved a proclamation that declared Aurora as Canada's Birthday Town. Soon after a by-law was passed ordering stores to close on July 1st. Approximately 15,000 people attended the inaugural two-day celebration, which was praised by surrounding communities and featured in the evening edition of the CBC news broadcast. The celebration featured fireworks, firefighter competitions, a parade, races, a beer garden as well as a performance from Bobby Gimby ? who happened to arrive by helicopter.

It might be hard to believe, but Aurora was very ahead of its time in celebrating July 1st. At the time it was not normal for a municipality to make a holiday out of Canada's birthday. Year after year, both residents and people from out of town flocked to Aurora Canada's Birthday Town to celebrate July 1st. Each year a new commemorative mug/stein was produced and handed out with admission to the beer garden ? I'm sure a few of our readers have one or two tucked away in their kitchen cupboards.

Of course, Aurora's celebration inspired patriotism along with local and national pride. It also prompted a more unexpected outcome as Ron Wallace recalls, ?July 1st joined Aurora, because prior to that, Aurora was three towns, the North End, the South End, and the Old Town? (Aurora Banner, June 25, 1975).

In 1982 July 1st was re-named Canada Day and municipalities were encouraged to plan their own local festivities to celebrate the country. I'm sure that these other celebrations were fantastic, but as great as they were, I'm equality positive that none could compare to those first years when Aurora celebrated the day under the banner of Canada's Birthday Town.