

TIME TRAVELLER'S DIARY: Dead Centre of Town

By Ally Falzone

As the festivities for Canada Day wind down, it should be noted that parades and fireworks were not the only activities celebrated with family and friends on Canada's birthday.

Did you know that on July 1st, 1885 Dominion Day was declared to be Decoration Day?

Much like a host spruces up the house to make it look its best for guests and onlookers; so too did the participants of Decoration Day strive to make Aurora Cemetery look its best:

At a meeting of the Directors of the Aurora Cemetery Company, held last Saturday evening, it was unanimously decided to have a Decoration Day on July 1st, (Dominion Day), to give lot owners and all parties interested, an opportunity to decorate and otherwise improve the ground. The Directors are spending a large amount of money now in gravelling the roads and improving the cemetery, and all those who are at all interested should do what they can to beautify the last resting place of there once so dearly loved.

(Aurora Banner, July 10, 1885)

Victorians and early Edwardians embraced death as an every-day fact of life, most likely due to the fact that death was much more omnipresent one hundred years ago.

Decoration Day was looked on as a time to beautify graves of family and community members. The day was treated as a community gathering where one could visit friends, both living and dead, in a similar fashion to the Mexican Dia de los Muertos where family members decorate headstones with flowers and candles to pay respect and honour their loved ones memories as ongoing, and not forgotten.

Upon entering the Aurora Cemetery, you will see the vault, built in 1868 for Charles Doan and colloquially referred to as the 'Dead House' which served as a repository for bodies during winter months.

It inspired similar builds in Bolton, and King City.

A walk farther through the cemetery today reveals much about the town's past inhabitants. There is John William Bowser whose grave marker is a 10-foot high stone in the shape of the Empire State Building. Bowser was the project construction superintendent of the building. The cemetery also contained the remains Captain A. Roy Brown DSO, DFC, commonly believed to be the man who shot down the infamous Baron Manfred von Richtofen, the Red Baron.

Brown's body however, was later reinterred at the Toronto Necropolis.

Don't forget to visit the grave of Josephine Wells, Canada's first female dentist who graduated from the University of Toronto, Faculty of Dentistry in 1893 and practiced dentistry for 36 years.

Decoration Day is no longer practiced in Aurora as cemetery staff do their due diligence in maintaining the cemetery. Aurorans can still be proud of their own little cemetery, even if there is no longer a dedicated day to the dead centre of town.