

Travel in style ? and through time ? with Nora's Suitcase



By Brock Weir

Nora Hillary was a woman both of her time and ahead of her time.

In some respects, she lived a relatively conventional life for a woman born in the Aurora of 1902 but, on the other hand, she took on the world, hitting international hotspots as a single, jet-setting woman.

The last resident of Hillary House, she left behind a treasure trove of artefacts from the golden age of travel, and a treasure trove for Aurora Historical Society curator Erika Mazanik to explore as she pieced together 'Nora's Suitcase', the new exhibition which opened Saturday at Hillary House.

Running through August 13, it charts Nora Hillary's love affair with travel from her first overseas adventure with her cousin Arthur in 1926 and her later years exploring just about every corner of the world.

'She had been all over the world,' says Ms. Mazanik of what piqued her curiosity going through many of the articles Nora left behind. 'She was a single woman travelling all over the world all through the 20th century and it got us more and more curious about her life. Every time I hear another story about Nora she seems like a more vivacious and exciting person and I really wanted to encapsulate that into the exhibit to honour her by showing off one of the most important aspects of her life.'

The journey starts with that 1926 trip on the S.S. Empress of Scotland with the Overseas Education League, which hit France, Belgium and England. She didn't have her parents with her, she wasn't visiting relatives, she and Arthur were on their own.

While bitten by the travel bug at that point, she had little opportunity to scratch her itch for the next few decades. In the 1930s and 1940s, she was an ardent worker with the Children's Aid Society, taking a few short holidays to places like Bermuda. But never having married or had children, by the time she retired, she was in her prime and ready to become a part of the jet set.

'A lot of people of her generation went off to England and Europe, it was pretty basic, but she was an adventurer and didn't stick to the typical,' explains Ms. Mazanik, noting her bent toward the unconventional. 'On one trip, she went from Toronto to Brazil to South Africa to Kenya and then to Britain.'

'She started smoking in her 60s, which was also the time when she was doing the bulk of her air travel. Smoking was a popular pastime on planes at that time, which is definitely not something we have now, but in talking to her family and doing the research, they all say that is when she started smoking. What I understood about her is the [philosophy] of 'if you can't beat them, join them. I

want to live life to the fullest.'?

The more Erika got to know Nora the more familiar she became with the two biggest parts of her life: being at home and getting away from it. It was in no small part due to Nora's efforts that Hillary House has been preserved as a National Historic Site under the auspices of the Aurora Historical Society.

Her heart was at Hillary House, but she left little pieces of her heart all around the world.

?The most important thing I think people should know about Nora Hillary is her enthusiasm for living life to the fullest,? says Erika. ?I really got that vibe from her in everything I would find. In the end, I just really wanted to meet her and ask, why did you decide to go to these places that weren't conventional for the time? It would be interesting to talk to her about those two passions, how they kind of didn't fit together but still somehow worked.?