

50 years on, Historical Society needs new vision: Founder



By Brock Weir

History is a way of life for Dr. Leslie Oliver, and something to which he has devoted his life.

Very active in the field of 'material culture', however, he tackles this topic from a very practical standpoint. He's not in it for the nostalgia or all the 'warm and fuzzy feelings' nostalgia can produce, but looking at history as a 'prologue' to where we are going.

'I don't carry around a lot of nostalgic imageries of the past because, in many ways, the past is a bust!' he says.

To underscore his point, he holds up a ballpoint pen. Sure, it's a simple pen but at the time, its development revolutionized the way people could communicate.

When he founded the Aurora Historical Society (AHS) 50 years ago this year, an anniversary which will be formally celebrated by its members this August, there was a drive to save people's 'memorabilia' for future generations. It was the beginning of the Aurora Collection, a large foundation of 'stuff' people have donated to the AHS over the past five decades to illustrate the past.

'Like the pen, they can provide some understandings of what life was about - values, interests, attitudes, and behaviours - of people,' says Dr. Oliver. 'But, in many ways, its collections are the least important.'

50 years on, Dr. Oliver expresses some dismay on the 'political toing and froing' about the Collection that has dominated so much of Council's discussion over the past 12 months. He looks back to the early decades of the AHS as a time of advocacy within the community, fighting the province for more effective consideration of historical assets, securing 'jewels in the crown' such as the Church Street School and the Grand Trunk Railway station on Wellington Street now used as the Aurora GO Station - and how far it has come.

With 50 years behind the AHS, it is now time to take a good look at where they are going, he says.

'In my professional background, the last thing I would expect is the Society to be carrying on much in the same way it has been over the last 25 or 30 years, let alone 50,' he says. 'It must invent a whole new future for itself.'

'Sometimes vision is hard to come by because when you're working with a volunteer group of people who come together because they have some sort of common base and shared value and interest in the community, or whether it is Councillors around the table, it is tough to generate widely held visions of what is possible, probable and preferred.'

One doesn't have to look far for examples of proving Dr. Oliver's argument. Aside from the debates over the future of the Collection itself, there has also been the debate on just what should be done with Hillary House. As a National Historic Site, there isn't an extensive catalogue of options, nor should there be, he says. It is one of those 'jewels in the crown.'

Dr. Oliver is not, however, entirely enthusiastic about plans for the home to become part of a \$10 million heritage park under the name 'Hillary-McIntyre Park.'

That plan is to combine Hillary House and the two properties immediately to the south into a public park with extensive renovations to the centre property to accommodate a new museum and conference facility.

'Part of our advocacy was very much connected with Hillary House,' Dr. Oliver recalls. 'It has, as it turns out, been a major driver in what the society has done and not done over the last 20 years or so. It has been a very resource-intensive undertaking, one that in many ways the Society shouldn't have got involved in. To take on a National Historic Site and try to manage and fund that thing is a step many people have been shaking their heads that we couldn't do that ' and, as it turns out, we couldn't.'

A parallel can be drawn, he adds, in what took place with the Church Street School. The AHS worked hard fundraising and securing grants to turn the building from its previous use to the 'Aurora Heritage Centre.' Eventually, he said, that had to be turned over to the Town, the AHS lost control, and now they have to 'get on our hands and knees to even get space in the building' for the Collection.

A similar thing, he said, could be happening at Hillary House if the park gains further traction. One of the drivers used by proponents is the idea it would eventually become a public park that would become a public asset owned and managed by the Town. While he has criticism over the heritage aspect of the Aurora Cultural Centre, he has praise for the Centre's operating model set up by the previous Council.

'That is not 21st century thinking,' says Dr. Oliver, of the Hillary-McIntyre plan. 'That is not the way we think about those Cultural Assets these days because there are other ways of talking about how those things can be brought to fruition ' how those lands can be saved and adapted for reuse as Cultural Assets for the Town, how we can retain those lands as taxable income as well as items on the debit side of the Town's accounts. There are much more sophisticated ways of thinking about that.

'I hope we will be able to move the agenda in a more sophisticated way of doing that. The jewel there is Hillary House and because Hillary house is a National Historic Site, it has economic, social and cultural value for this Town. As a Town, we have got to mine that and make it work for us. [The scenario has] 2+ acres and Hillary House. What is the vision for those two acres five to 10 years from now and how is that going to work for us?'

Next week in the second part of our interview with Dr. Leslie Oliver, Aurora's 1983 Citizen of the Year, we will explore the foundations of the Aurora Historical Society and how it has evolved over the past 50 years.