

## A century on, Aurora's first tennis court re-opens -- just in time for Pan Am



At Hillary House on Monday afternoon... (Auroran photo by David Falconer)

**By Brock Weir**

Dressed to the nines in their tennis whites, Aurora's finest tennis players gathered for a group photo on the new grass courts laid out on the north lawn of Hillary House.

That was in the summer of 1913 ? but Aurora's finest tennis players, some ranked among the best in the world, gathered on the same location this Monday to recreate the scene, inaugurating the Aurora Historical Society's (AHS) newly-restored courts.

Hillary House's historic grass courts, the foundation of the still-thriving Aurora Community Tennis Courts, were officially inaugurated by members of the Society and local dignitaries just in time for this week's Pan American Games, which open Friday in Toronto.



... and the same scene in 1913.

With an infusion of cash from the Community Celebrations Fund, a pot established for community celebrations throughout the GTA to commemorate the games, Hillary House will host a series of exhibition games on their lawns throughout the Pan Am and Parapan Games.

On hand to help cut the ribbon on the new facility this week was Newmarket-Aurora MP Lois Brown, who came bearing the financial gifts.

?What a great day this is to see this project actually coming to fruition,? said Ms. Brown. ?I know the Aurora Historical Society has worked on it extensively and it was a great project we were able to support through my office. I am very pleased to see Heritage

Canada, along with Canada Sport, was able to see fit to put in \$24,500 to the Aurora Historical Society to see this project come together.

"I am thrilled you are all here to support this great endeavour and I look forward to watching the games that are going to be played here in this court and cheer on the winners."

The Aurora Community Tennis Club (ACTC) also received an infusion of cash from Ms. Brown. \$24,800 from the New Horizons for Seniors Program has been granted to the club to modify their existing courts at McMahon Park to accommodate the booming sport of Pickle Ball, an activity particularly popular with local seniors.

After taking in the scene of the new grass court, Canada's tennis greats marvelled not only at the facility, but also ongoing exhibitions within Hillary House itself charting the history of tennis both in Aurora and across the country.

"This is the first time I have heard the real history of tennis because of this place - all the different balls, all the different racquets, everything is here," said Robert Bedard, Canada's #1 ranked singles player in the 1950s and 60s, with numerous Canadian Open titles and a membership on Canada's Davis Cup team under his belt.

He gingerly hopped back on the new Hillary House court for a game of mixed doubles to inaugurate the grass.

"This court is a bit smaller than normal, but that is irrelevant - this is fun," he said. "If you are at Wimbledon, you have grass like this. I hope people know something is happening here at Hillary House because there has been a lot of effort here organizing this."

Brendan Macken, 92, shared a similar view. A top ranked player in the 1940s and 1950s, playing Wimbledon and the Davis Cup, he said he was intrigued by the AHS' efforts and looking forward to being part of the action as well.

"I think it is fascinating what they have done here," said Mr. Macken. "I have a couple of items at home and they are interested in adding them to the exhibition. I won the Canadian Open in 1950 and there wasn't any money in the game back then. My prize was a fishing rod - without the reel! - and that was it. I still have it, but I have never fished. That's an indication of the type of sports they had before there was money in the game!"

Eager to try his hand at Mr. Macken's fishing rod is Bill Albino of the AHS, called the "brains" behind the plan to recreate the courts. The Hillary family who owned the house were very athletic and veterans of all the popular sports of the day, but tennis had a particular poignancy. In the original photo from 1913, Stewart Hillary is pictured. He was killed at the Battle of Vimy Ridge and the court subsequently fell into disuse. As time wore on, however, the family got back into the sport, establishing clay courts near the rear of their property, which housed the ACTC until the 1930s.

"We wanted to marry Aurora heritage, and heritage in general, sports, and Pan Am into one event," said Mr. Albino. "With the generosity of people like Zander Sod and a bunch of other partners we have been able to put it all back together. The big event starts on July 18 [but] we wanted to get on the courts as soon as it was ready, it has been six weeks in preparation and it is now ready for use."