

AHS Speakers Series launches Wednesday with British home children

By Brock Weir

Sandra Joyce always had some question marks surrounding her father, but what those questions were was the ultimate query.

She knew he had come to Canada from the United Kingdom and, while growing up, he was her best friend. But once she hit puberty, all of that changed. Something shifted and she was never quite able to put her finger on why.

On a trip to Halifax after he died, Ms. Joyce, a journalist by trade, stopped by the research room at Pier 21 to look up her dad's immigration records. What she found surprised her. Always believing he came over to Canada as an adult, she discovered he actually came to Canada as a young child from an orphanage in Scotland. He was a British Home Child, though she scarcely knew what the term meant.

Home children were orphaned children ? or, at the very least, children placed in orphanages by their parents ? to come to places like Canada to live (and ultimately work) on farms until the age of 18. For lack of a better term, to become ?indentured workers.?

?My dad never gave me any indication this was the case, and it was quite startling,? says Ms. Joyce. ?As I did research into his background and into the history of the whole child migrant scheme, it helped me understand him and also a large part of Canadian history. One in ten Canadians are descendants of home children.?

Ms. Joyce, who shares this story in her new book ?The Street Arab?, hopes to shed light on this murky portion of Canadian history along with fellow author Karen Mahoney at Hillary House next Wednesday in a special historical talk hosted by the Aurora Historical Society (AHS).

While the story of Ms. Joyce's father illustrates the negative impacts of the Home Children scheme, Ms. Mahoney's story illustrates the opposite side of the coin. Her husband's grandfather had home children on the farm and they were such a part of the family her husband himself did not know that they weren't.

?We present the full spectrum of what was happening to the British home children,? says Ms. Joyce. ?I hope that if people don't know where their family came from they dig deeper. It will help explain a lot to them and it will also explain a lot about Canadian history, which is really a lot more interesting than some schoolchildren think.?

It certainly helped explain a lot to Ms. Joyce.

?My father was a very reserved man and I never understood why things changed between us,? she says. ?I thought I had done something wrong in order for him to change his whole behaviour towards me. When I found out he had gone into care at the age of nine and had no real experience of family until we were there, he didn't really know what to do. He didn't know how to behave towards children, siblings and his own children. When they were brought over here, they were expected to work, so they lost their whole childhoods.

?This is why this isn't part of our collective public knowledge because for the children who were part of this scheme, once they were at the end of the indenture at 18 they would really want to put it all behind them. They were often stigmatized in the communities around them, made to feel they were inferior, made fun of and, more often than not, isolated, ignored and not really accepted into the family or allowed to speak to the other children in the family. Once they hit 18, they would carry on and become part of the general public and didn't want it hanging over their head.?

As Ms. Joyce delved deeper, sparks were ignited to learn more. She was astounded by the sheer number of children who participated in the program through the 1930s and the fact some parents simply signed away their parental rights, perhaps in the belief their kids would have a good life, with good food and fresh air. For many kids, however, that was an ideal rather than a reality. Now, she tells

their story.

?My hope is this becomes more a part of our history like some of the other groups have been able to do and it is very important to understand that because history is what makes us who we are as Canadians, what makes us different,? she says. ?If we understand our history, then we can be better Canadians and look forward much better.?

This latest presentation in the AHS Speaker Series gets underway this Wednesday, November 25, at 6.30 p.m. Tickets are \$7 per person and \$5 for members of the Aurora Historical Society.