

Aurora Pet Cemetery documentary takes Gold at Telly Awards



It will still be a while before Aurora residents can fully experience what's left of the Happy Woodland Pet Cemetery, but people can get a sneak peek of what once was and what will be in the new documentary *Happy Woodland Pet Cemetery: Uncovering History*.

The documentary, commissioned by the Town of Aurora and the Aurora Museum and Archives, charting the remarkable history of what could very well be Canada's first purpose-developed pet cemetery, recently took home top honours at the Telly Awards.

Produced by Tracy and Tom Strnad of Mountain Goat Film Company, the documentary will premiere locally as part of the grand opening celebrations of Aurora Town Square this fall.

"The pet cemetery here in Aurora is truly one of the most unique parts of our history, and we've been working on a way to preserve and showcase its fascinating history," said Mayor Tom Mrakas in a statement. "This film beautifully captures some of the really creative work our team at the Museum & Archives is undertaking to make that a reality."

The pet cemetery was originally opened and operated by Victor Blochin and Anne Wilson in Aurora's south end, and was formally dedicated in 1934. From its inception, it became a popular place for Aurora residents to immortalize their four-legged friends and, soon, a destination for people across the country to inter their animals — everything from budgies to RCMP horses.

The property was sold in the late 1970s and, facing neglect, its importance and legacy began to fade from memory — that is, until the Town purchased the property in 2011, tasking what's now the Aurora Museum & Archives to begin the challenging task of restoration and cataloguing as many burials as possible.

"Much of this painstaking and detailed work is captured in the film, including cataloguing the burial sites of more than 800 named pets on the property, unearthing headstones that were displaced from their original locations, and using archival footage and photos as well as ground-penetrating radar, to determine the original boundary of the cemetery," says the Town. "Informing all of this work is building upon the cemetery's current designation under the Ontario Heritage Act to potentially be designated as a national historic site."

The future of the site, as much as the past, is just one element that attracted Mountain Goat Film Company, which has previously produced a documentary on the Queen's York Rangers for the Aurora Museum & Archives, to the project.

"It's an evolving story," Tom Strnad tells *The Auroran*. "It's not just telling the history, but we're capturing the story as it unfolds, as

well. There's a history, but there's contemporary history to it, which is finding the cemetery, rehabilitating and preserving the cemetery, figuring out its place in Aurora, and that story has been really exciting and a parallel to what it was in the past. It's really exciting when there's a story like this basically happening as we're filming. A lot has happened that is captured in this film and we're also going to continue working on the next parts of it as the story unfolds, too.?

It's a unique place, he adds, that is a relatively unknown historic landmark.

?There is a nice, new unfolding story on how the Town is going to be able to turn it into a parkland and acquiring that property and I think that is really a great idea because, at first, it was more of a preservation project and trying to secure that cemetery area, but essentially it's now growing and there is interest in these parklands,? he says. ?As things are developed and houses everywhere, it is really important to have these spaces where we can celebrate the lives of [the past] whether it is pets?and you can take a moment. There's the real solitude you can find there in the woods and these great 100-year-old trees. I think it is so important that we have these greenspaces and parklands and I think that would be the greatest thing that this now will be available for everyone, not just Aurorans, but anybody visiting or wishing to go to a one-of-a-kind parkland with this unique pet cemetery.?

Adds Michelle Johnson, Collections and Exhibitions Coordinator at the Aurora Museum & Archives: ?We're not just restoring a pet cemetery, but also telling a really important story about the lives of people from the 1930s all the way to the 1970s and the strong connection they had to this very special place. And with Happy Woodland likely being the first pet cemetery in Canada, we feel a great responsibility to restore this incredibly unique place as best we can to its original form.?

Future stories of the lives of individuals and pets associated with the Pet Cemetery will be featured in sequel documentaries, Johnson adds, noting that ?interdepartmental? work at Town Hall continues to ensure residents will be able to access the landmark safely and accessibly.

By Brock Weir