

BROCK'S BANTER: You gotta get a gimmick

By Brock Weir

Mother's Day around my house usually follows a pattern or two.

Before my maternal grandmother died in 2012, it was usually a day in which my family was required to pay her homage. Since her passing, however, the day can be best described with two words: road trip!

This year, my mom had a particular objective in mind. After visiting it for the first time in decades on her birthday earlier this spring, she wanted a return engagement to a very nice restaurant on Toronto Island, spending the day poking around everything the islands have to offer ? or, after the recent flooding, whatever is left.

By the time Mother's Day rolled around, she figured mid-May would offer ideal patio weather.

Well, so much for that theory. As it became clear that mid-May was ultimately going to be mid-Mayn't, the reservations were duly cancelled and it was back to the drawing board.

Shortly thereafter, however, a potentially fun excursion presented itself in the form of a military event in Goderich to mark the special and ongoing relationship between Canada and The Netherlands, one that has endured since the Liberation of Holland in 1945.

Goderich's festivities were to feature a special visit from the Dutch Princess Margriet and her husband.

This particular Princess, as many Canadians know, has a special connection to our country, having been born at what was then Ottawa Civic Hospital when her mother, the pregnant future Queen Juliana, sought refuge with her daughters in our Nation's Capital after the Nazi invasion.

To ensure Juliana's child could remain in the Line of Succession, the government of the day declared the delivery room territory of the Dutch Embassy so the Princess was technically born on her native soil right in the heart of Canada.

As a special thank you not only for the Liberation, but also for providing safe harbour to the Royal Family, the Netherlands continue to donate hundreds of thousands of tulip bulbs to Canada each and every year.

Her story has become a piece of Canadian historical folklore. Case in point: As a student at Carleton University in Ottawa, I twice had occasion to sit in that particular hospital for an interminable time waiting to be seen.

Over the estimated total of 14 hours I spent there, the Princess' birth came up no less than three times.

So, come Sunday, with the added attraction of taking in Lake Huron, Goderich was duly plugged into the GPS.

A beautiful drive awaited us on that chilly-but-sunny Mother's Day. With no reason to take a 400-series highway, it was a wonderful opportunity to pass through towns and villages known to us only from road signs and roadmaps. Then there were those whose very existence was news to us.

There were long stretches of greenery, expanses of open fields, herds of cattle to pass, flocks of sheep, several heads of horses, and, truth be told, even a pack of camels.

There were settlements of thousands, hamlets of only a few buildings, but each had their own charms.

Regional signs proclaimed 'Ontario's West Coast,' presumably referring to Lake Huron. A sign for a village proclaimed itself, slightly prematurely, as 'a former ghost town.' And Goderich?

Well, the Princess and her husband were late for the first ceremony of the afternoon.

Nearly half an hour after her scheduled arrival, the emcee came out on stage, holding onto his baseball cap in the blustery wind, to warm up the increasingly blustery crowd.

He had a patter which seemed time-tested.

After approaching the microphone, he gave a royal status update and an introduction to the Mayor of Goderich which, he proclaimed to be 'as it says on their Town markers' to be 'The Prettiest Town in Canada.'

Apparently this was the cue for the locals to cheer wildly. And they did ? but evidently not loud enough for the emcee's taste, so this exercise was repeated three more times before the royal arrival.

By the fourth ovation, I started to think there was a common thread to the sites we had passed through earlier in the day: every town has a gimmick.

Goderich is not far off the mark. It is a beautiful town. It has a lovely and unique octagonal main street with an equally beautiful courthouse as its focal point.

Orangeville, our first port of call that morning, has rebranded its main street with a focus on the arts.

Wingham has a main drag with some very unique examples of architecture.

And Wroexter? Well, if their Welcome To signs are anything to go by, it's still working on that whole 'former ghost town' thing. The point is, each place we encountered, had its own angle, its own draw, and its own sense of identity.

On the drive back, I couldn't help but wonder how Aurora will fare in the identity stakes two or three years down the road.

Indeed, we could start getting an idea of the shape of things to come sooner rather than later with possible dramatic transformations up for grabs over the next few weeks.

By the end of this month, plans to radically transform Aurora's historic Downtown Core with a new Aurora United Church and seven-storey seniors' residence could be firmed up.

Whether you believe the proposed development will be a 'jewel' in Aurora's crown or a precedent-setting move with the potential to throw all of Aurora's heritage planning out the window, there seem to be very few disinterested bystanders in how this will ultimately shake down.

The decision, one way or another, will be felt for generations to come.

As will the discussions set to take place this week and next on Library Square.

Okay, so tacking additions onto the rear-ends of the Aurora Cultural Centre and Victoria Hall, and throwing a water feature into the middle of a new parking lot aren't exactly revolutionary concepts, but this could all be temporary.

Presuming a parking lot is approved to take the place of the former Aurora Public Library and Seniors' Centre buildings on Victoria Street by the end of next week's Council meeting (and, no, I'm not placing any money whatsoever on this being brought in for a landing by the May 23 Council meeting, let's be clear) there is still an option to replace this parking lot with something more useful down the road; something that is a draw, something which could become a focal point and, yes, even a gimmick.

A parking lot will undoubtedly provide some temporary relief, but a well-planned amenity could stand the test of time. Aurora's historic downtown core is bleeding with a mass exodus to the west. Nobody wants the downtown core to become anything close to a ghost town because, if that does come to pass, I really don't think we can look to Wroexter for tips on rejuvenation!