"Canada's Birthday Town" set for renaissance

By Brock Weir

Once upon a time, just north of Toronto, there was a Town which made a bold proclamation.

?Canada's Birthday Town,? was a slogan which greeted visitors entering Aurora well into the new millennium, but that slogan and the evocative spiral emblem that went with it are becoming an increasingly distant ? or perhaps even non-existent ? memory for younger generations.

But, that is all set to change thanks to the Aurora Museum & Archives.

As Canada gets ready to celebrate its 150th Birthday in grand style in just over two weeks, the Museum is shedding light on a local initiative which, in the lead up to the 1967 Centennial, set a blueprint for July 1 celebrations which became the standard far and wide.

This Wednesday, June 21, the Museum will unveil its new exhibition, charting the various ways Aurora has marked Canada's Birthday since patriotism reached fever pitch in the lead-up to the Centennial Celebrations. Not surprisingly, it was this patriotic surge which led to the birth of ?Canada's Birthday Town? in 1969.

?In 1967, everyone was feeling patriotic, there was a lot of stuff happening around Town and Expo 67 Federally to celebrate Canada's 100th birthday,? says curator Michelle Johnson. ?What we saw in 1967 was that the celebrations took place in June. There was nothing happening on July 1 proper.?

Enter the savvy residents of Richardson Drive.

They decided to mark Canada's 100th Birthday with a street party, going to the Council of the day for permission. Their 1967 party was such a success, they sought similar permission the following year and, by the next, it was a firmly established tradition.

?A logo was created and we started celebrating Canada Day on July 1,? says Ms. Johnson. ?This is the 48th annual July 1 celebration and that is a legacy that is pretty substantial around here in celebrating Canada Day on July 1.?

Over the years, the way Aurorans and, indeed, Canadians celebrated the day changed and evolved. Here at home, it was a celebration that included community races, games, and even a firefighter competition called ?water ball.? As Aurora's July 1 celebrations were on the forefront of the wave, the local party attracted people from Newmarket and as far flung as Bradford and Sutton to take part.

?The heyday of the celebrations was in the 70s and 80s,? says Ms. Johnson, noting there was a shift in the early 1980s when Dominion Day gave way to Canada Day and the Federal Government became involved in providing incentives for communities to shape their own local celebrations. People wouldn't necessarily come from Stouffville and Bradford to celebrate Canada Day, they would celebrate their own Canada Day celebrations. It became less of a draw for surrounding communities. The unique quality started to shift.?

So, when Canada's Birthday Town was once the place to be to celebrate Canada's Birthday, it eventually became just one more destination in a sea of communities decked out in red and white. Nevertheless, while Canada Day festivities continue on full-force, these glory days are long gone.

When Museum Curator Shawna White, a resident of Burlington, first came on board to lay the groundwork for the revitalized museum, she was struck by a huge collection of glass mugs emblazoned with the ?Canada's Birthday Town? logo and wanted to

know more.

She said the fact Aurora was on the forefront of Canada Day celebrations as we know it was a fact that fascinated her and gave them the idea for a new exhibition at some point down the road. What better time, she thought, than Canada 150?

?This year is big on anniversaries ? 150 moments and 150 everything ? and in two years it will be 50 years since we declared ourselves to be Canada's Birthday Town,? says Ms. Johnson. ?With this exhibition, we took a little bit of a different approach. Instead of your traditional panel, we wanted lots of images with some text, anchored in the Centennial, this idea of patriotism, and how that directly translated to the Aurora experience with the block parties and becoming a ?Birthday Town.'

?We want the narrative of how we came the ?Birthday Town' and there are some really good ways of pulling together what this meant. There is a quote from Ron Wallace that we're including where he talks about how July 1 really brought Aurora together. Before July 1, it was north, south, east and west. This day brought everyone together at the ACC as a Town; that sense of community and uniting all of the corners of the Town around this unique kind of holiday and designation for the time.

?I hope that comes through the most. People were having fun. The whole design and approach to this is very jovial and celebratory and fun. Hopefully when people walk in and see the exhibit they are going to feel that sense of celebration come through.?

And those iconic ?Canada's Birthday Town? glass mugs? Well, to coincide with the Sesquicentennial and the new exhibition, they are making a comeback.

A limited run of 150 mugs has been created and they will soon be for sale at The Aurora Museum and Archives and Town Hall for $15, tax included.

Mugs will also be sold at a special celebration being planned by the Museum and Town for Friday, June 30 ahead of the traditional pre-Canada Day Dance in the Park to mark the 150th anniversary of Town Park itself.

For more on the celebrations to mark the 150th anniversary of Town Park, check back with The Auroran.