

CONTACT Photography Festival returns to Aurora for second year



Small details can paint a vivid picture, and the Aurora Museum and Archives is turning a magnifying glass to more than a century's worth of local snapshots, portraits and studio sessions as part of the CONTACT Photography Festival.

Aurora is participating in the Festival for the second year running and the Town's contribution to the event, through the Museum, is Aurora Through the Archives: [un]Framed in Focus.

Installed throughout Aurora Town Square on May 2, the exhibition will be in place through to the end of June.

“The CONTACT Photography Festival is a very well-known festival in Toronto. Contact is a not-for-profit, and they take the time to showcase photography, contemporary photography, historic photography, and to be part of this large Regional festival, it's really quite an honor,” says Michelle Johnson of the Aurora Museum & Archives. “There's the Core Program and Open Call, so last year we were part of the Open Call Program, this year we were juried into the Core Program, and that brings exhibitions that are presented in public spaces and galleries kind of to another level.

“It's more of a professional presentation, so we're really honored this year to be selected as part of the Core Program. There's quite a big following with the festival, people are quite enthusiastic about the types of exhibits that are included in the program. It's a great way for us to get people heading up on the GO Train or taking a trip a bit further north out of the city to see the photographs that we have on display, and by nature of us being a Museum and Archive, they're also learning about the history of this community and what makes Aurora so unique.”

But the devil is in the details, and that's where these selected photographs, which span from the 1860s to the early 1980s, truly shine.

“We have photos that feature family groups, there are photos that feature residents out front of Yonge Street buildings in the late 1800s, and each one really does tell a wholesome story about that moment in time,” says Johnson. “One photo that is easy to talk about in this regard is the oldest photo that we have of Yonge Street, taken from just south of Tyler Street, looking north towards Yonge and Mosley. The photo dates from about 1867 to 1872. It's within that five-year range for sure. In that photograph, it shows the original Town Hall building that was just a repurposed home that was on the north corner of Yonge and Mosley. It shows George Lemon's Hotel and Tin Shop before the fire that took it down. You can see the front yard of the United Church, not quite the original building, but you can see the front yard, and, of course, this is before the radial railway or any type of mass transportation down Yonge Street, so it really is just a dirt road.

“From that photo, we're able to kind of extract different stories. We're able to talk about the important role that hotels played during

this period in Aurora's history; they were meeting places, they were places of commerce and business, and there was quite a few of them. This was before, of course, any type of community centre. It also shows really this, I wouldn't quite say bustling, but on the verge of what's about to become a bustling, small village centre.

?How this exhibition looks is that there is an original archival photo that is in a frame on the wall and surrounding that photo is like an interpretive panel that is placed over top. On that panel is where we've pulled out zoomed-in pieces of the photo and elaborated on the different stories contained within.?

Johnson says that as people take in the photo exhibition, they hope they can spark curiosity not only of the images themselves, but how photography can tell a story and its role as an art form.

?The longer you look at something like this, the more you find, and through our curatorial process, we were able to really tease out some unique pieces of these photographs that speak to that moment in time. I hope that people value the experience of slowing down to engage with archival photographs. That's really how this started for us,? says Johnson, noting that working outside their traditional museum space for the construction of Town Square inspired the team to get creative.

?We were zooming in on different images to look at these fine details and it was an incredible experience [and we thought] how can we replicate this for the public? It's just taking time to slow down and discover the hidden pieces. They say a picture tells a thousand words, but I think you need to slow down to take the time to look at it and really get the full story ? and we hope that the way we presented the photos allows visitors to do that.?

By Brock Weir