

Family who called Oakland Hall home concerned about proposed move



By Brock Weir

The first time Andy McClure arrived at the house that is now known as Oakland Hall, he wandered off to the garage, leaving his parents Donald and Dorothy wondering where he had run off too.

When he emerged, they asked him what he was doing and he said "I was playing with the little girl." There was, however, no little girl.

By the time they moved into their new home in 1968, however artist Dorothy Clark McClure had her own run-in with the little girl in the front parlour.

Apparition or not, the ghostly little girl's connection to the historic home, otherwise known as The Red House Studio has been lost over the 180 years of time that has passed since it was first constructed, but Andy, his sister Kelly and their brother Chris – and indeed their father, Donald – are living stitches in the tapestry of this unique corner of Aurora.

Chris and Donald were not quite as open to the idea of ghosts as the other family members were, with Chris saying he pooh-poohed the whole idea, but the siblings laugh recalling coming home from a trip with their mother to find their dad, who was staying home by himself, with a shotgun by the bed after hearing a party of yore echoing from the stairs.

Having grown up in the house, they are concerned about proposals to lift the building and move it closer to Yonge Street on the same lot, or to an adjacent lot just north of the property, to make way for a new development that is likely to be a condominium complex.

"I can tell you exactly what mom would be saying right now," says Andy.

"She would be saying a lot, let me tell you!" Kelly interjects. "She would be saying that, historically, what happens in this moment is the plan is to move the house or relocate it, but something happens: a wall falls down, there's a fire, a crane swings to the left and it hits something, and it is just torn down. It is not anyone's fault, but that's the way it is."

Patting a faded red brick near the historical plaque showing the building's designation, Chris offers a similar sentiment.

"This is old community kiln brick with mortar and it is kind of like lifting a stack of pancakes with one finger," he says. "Logistically, we're wondering if it is possible."

"Mom would be worried that it won't get to the place it is supposed to."

'Mom' certainly had a strong connection to the house. The late Aurora artist told The Auroran shortly before her death that she was always 'one step ahead of the wrecking ball' when it came to documenting heritage buildings in the area with her paint brush and sepia pens.

She and her former husband Donald secured the house after first laying eyes on it in 1967. In a brief history of the building, she wrote about first seeing the house on a painting excursion and the beautiful house on the hill taking her breath away.

'We were invited inside the house and a curious thing happened,' Dorothy wrote. 'I immediately fell in love and announced, 'You are living in my house!' to the puzzled owner, Mr. Holland. Then, another strange thing occurred somewhat later when a car with a lady driver stopped in front of our home in King and she offered \$25,000 in cash for it, even though there was no For Sale sign. She didn't even look inside.'

Then, a few days later, Mr. Holland called The McClures offering it to them for \$25,000 plus a mortgage. Dorothy described it as 'some kind of divine intervention.'

The Hollands were just one of a series of families since the land was first purchase by Reuben Burr in 1805. The home, which some historians speculate has been incorporated into the present structure, was bought by Thomas Cosford, and it changed hands several more times before being purchased by George Leacock, brother of the humourist Stephen.

'The person who built the house, Thomas Cosford, was a carriage maker and carpenter,' muses Andy. 'That is a craftsman and mom and dad are both craftspeople. They care about the quality of the way things are made and they have always instilled in us that details matter and the finish matters. It is one of those things that is not so prevalent in our contemporary culture, but you could always see that here.'

The siblings hope that continues, whatever the future holds for the Red House and Oakland Hall.