

Film screening amps up excitement for Pet Cemetery restoration



Past, present and future came together at Aurora Town Square last week as the Aurora Museum and Archives premiered the documentary "Happy Woodland Pet Cemetery: Uncovering History."

Nearly 200 people attended the October 7 event, which featured the Telly Award-winning documentary on a landmark in Aurora's south end that could be the country's earliest-established pet cemetery, leaving viewers hungry to see the space in person.

Produced by Mountain Goat Film Company and the Aurora Museum and Archives, the documentary features the extensive restoration work that has and continues to take place at the Pet Cemetery over the last decade, while also touching upon its historic past and its potential future as a heritage destination.

The Happy Woodland Pet Cemetery, believed to be the first pet cemetery in Canada, was originally operated by Victor Blochin and Anne Wilson who purchased the property on Yonge Street in the late 1920s. In 1934, an official dedication ceremony was held with more than 100 people in attendance. It soon became a popular destination for people to honour their deceased pets, with pet owners from across Canada sending the remains of their animals to be buried there.

Operations wound down by the late 1970s, leaving the space little more than a memory for many local residents, until the Town acquired the property in 2011 and restoration work began.

Last week's screening featured a post-show question-and-answer period with Aurora Museum & Archives staff members Michelle Johnson and Jeremy Hood joined by the film's co-director Tom Strnad, and restoration volunteer Nancy Black.

From the questions fielded from the audience, it was clear that members of the community were eager for an in-person visit to augment the virtual experience.

"We have to have restoration complete before we can provide public access," said Johnson. "In terms of public access, a wonderful thing happened in December of last year. This site, the best way to describe it was as a donut - it was the hole in the middle of the donut and what that means is everything around it was the land that didn't belong to us (the Town). Every time we had to move forward to do restoration work, and when we were planning public access, trails and routes, it was done in consultation with the property owner and that added time to the process. Last December, the Town actually purchased all that land, which means we're no longer the Timbit."

"How will this site connect with the trail systems and the park systems and what it can be when it is fully realized with the whole corporation surrounding it now as municipal land?"

Access also includes restoring trails to where the Pet Cemetery was in its prime. Helping to lead that work was volunteer Black who said footage of the space in full swing, as recorded in the 1960s by the CBC in footage included within the documentary, has helped shed light on where things were at that particular snapshot in time.

'I hope, in the end, people who visit in this generation will be able to navigate it very similar to how people were doing it previously,' she said.

This process is covered in detail in the film.

Strnad, who co-directed the piece with Tracey Strnad of Mountain Goat, said it was a 'magical space.'

'There was no guideline on how to approach this, but what is really interesting with this project is it keeps evolving,' he said. 'Things work, things don't work, struggles, and then the triumphs and all of a sudden it is like this amazing gift getting that CBC footage that helped everyone identify things but then, all of a sudden, it is this really rich material that starts steer what was discovered and all the filming that we have kind of this anchor to put it around that says, 'Okay, this is where that spot is?' because you're walking around and discovering it and not really sure what the story is. It slowly keeps going and the next chapter will continue to be exciting, too.'

And that excitement was indeed felt by the crowd, one of whom asked what the Museum and, by extension, the Town, needs to make it ready for the public.

'Everybody wants to see this succeed. It's a matter of process,' said Johnson. 'Having everything in line at the right time. We want to have a fence put up to protect the site, but we need to know where the access route for maintenance vehicles will be, which begs the question of where are the trails going to go? Is that going to be the right access for vehicular access or is it the right access for pedestrian access? There are many moving pieces but what is so encouraging about this ' everybody wants to go there, especially hearing us speak about it and having watched the documentary. All the people who are moving these pieces are just as anxious as all of us to see this brought to fruition and it is being done in a way that is thinking about the future use and how can we provide the community with the best experience possible. We have the support and it's just a matter of doing it in the right methodical order.

'It has Provincial designation, which is fantastic. That's the one in terms of designation that really has some teeth to it. We are still pursuing National designation. That is more honourific'and we are working very closely with the Heritage Planner and the Planning Department on that.

'The site is loved and adored by many people who are not sitting up here tonight and it took a lot of people to get it to where it is today. There are too many to name, but when you think about this project, please know how many people are behind it, it extends beyond the people you see here.'

By Brock Weir