

Fleury family ploughs fertile ground in new exhibition



By Brock Weir

You may no longer recognize their name, but their influences are all around.

From local landmarks to the Town of Aurora's own flag, there are signs of the Fleury family everywhere you look, but all too often this founding family's contributions as a leading employer and agricultural innovator are forgotten to history.

This, however, is about to change thanks to the Fleury family themselves in *The Plow in the Crest*, the new exhibition co-curated by the Aurora Museum & Archives along with siblings Bill, David and Anne Fleury, great-grandchildren of the company founder.

Joseph Fleury founded Fleury Agricultural Implement Works in 1859 in Machell's Corners, the name of the village that evolved into Aurora.

Their large-scale factory can still be seen on Wellington Street, just west of Yonge Street, and it was from there they became a leading name in agricultural machinery for the next century. But the building is one of the few visual reminders of the company's integral place in the history of Aurora.

Apart from a healthy batch of papers still owned by the Fleurys, there were few hard reminders of their shared history within the family. Once the siblings reached retirement age, they set about to learn more.

"David and I showed up about 18 months ago and met Shawna White (curator of the Aurora Museum & Archives) and we got into a conversation about the archives they had on the Fleury company and family," says Bill. "We just didn't really know very much about them. I am not sure why, but my father and his sister didn't really impart much information about their family to us. We finally had the opportunity to delve into it and had enough time to produce something."

Ms. White encouraged them to produce that certain something, collaborating on the exhibition which aims to bring together material which already existed within the Museum's archives, as well as the investigative and genealogical legwork the Fleurys have done to fill in some of the gaps.

"We had our personal papers and did research in the National Archives and the French archives in Paris to find as many elements of the story as we could," says Bill. "Our vision is for a comprehensive [exhibition] of the family in Aurora, the growth of the company, and as many names of the men and women who worked at the company as we can discover. We hope it is the most comprehensive look as anyone has seen of the role of the Fleurys in Aurora and the 80 years that company existed."

As a private company, Bill says there are few accessible financial records to paint a full picture of the company. Details were found, for instance, at Harvard Business School where they found a reference in their archives to a visit from an agent to the Fleury Factory as early as 1862, a full year before "Aurora" was founded.

An additional goldmine was found in contemporary archives of *The Aurora Banner*.

While they have found reams of information through sheer diligence, Bill says the Fleurys are well aware that the research process is very much a "work in progress." Yet, what they have found so far has brought together themes, he says, which still resonate to this day.

Documents from the company principals to Prime Minister Wilfrid Laurier, for instance, were uncovered supporting proposals for what we would now describe as a free trade agreement between Canada and the United States.

There is also that thread of an entrepreneurial spirit enduring today.

?The legacy [of the Fleury Works] in Aurora is probably the entrepreneurial spirit and dedication that is involved, and that is represented by the plow in the crest,? says Bill. ?Even though the company doesn't even exist in Aurora anymore, we would argue the underlying spirit of why the plough is in the crest is the community-minded spirit that it represents still exists, hopefully.

?It is a fascinating story about how a village turned into a Town and how a Town and the people of the Town made every effort to develop their own local identity and their own local economy. The workers of the company cared for each other. If someone was injured and couldn't work, they put together funds to help them. It was a very sort of self-reliant and proud community and I think that was mirrored across Ontario.

?The Fleury Company survived, did very well up to the First World War and it was apparently still profitable in the 20s and 30s, and I think that in itself is a reflection of the loyalty of the Town and the capability of the workers.?

The Plow in the Crest: How Joseph Fleury and his Sons Shaped Industry, Politics and Community in Aurora opens at the Aurora Museum & Archives (22 Church Street) this Saturday, October 21.