

Historical Society thinks big for Canada 150



By Brock Weir

If you live along Yonge Street, you only need to step outside your door to find the integral threads woven into just about every facet of Canadian history ? and the Aurora Historical Society hopes to tie up these loose ends in a series of celebrations leading up to Canada's 150th anniversary in 2017.

The Aurora Historical Society (AHS) is currently riding high after the success of their History of Tennis programs, held to coincide with ? and in conjunction with ? the 2015 Pan and Parapan Games, which recently wrapped in Toronto.

?The dimension of sport history and Hillary House history is something I never even knew existed,? says Bill Albino, Vice President of the AHS. ?We had an opportunity to bring it back, and we did [through the exhibition and the recreation of the historic grass tennis court on the north lawn], attracting our normal constituency of heritage-oriented people who got to see something from an interesting and different angle, plus we picked up a whole new group of people. There have been a lot of new faces throughout the place.?

This, he says, has translated into plenty of new members for the AHS, illustrating ?history is not all wars, confederations, and constitutions.? But, the latter two will play an important part as the Society looks to keep the momentum going. Next year's exhibitions will continue the focus on the First World War, but come 2017, that focus will radically shift to the history of Yonge Street.

Hillary House is the only National Historic Site on Yonge Street, and along this artery came the early incarnation of the Queen's York Rangers to build the street, paving the way for a steady stream of Loyalist and Quaker settlers, troops heading in the opposite direction to fight in the War of 1812, politically-minded individuals following the path for the 1837 Rebellion, the Simcoe Huron Railway enabling industry to hit this once sleepy hamlet, and political machinations that lead directly to confederation.

?It will be 15 chapters based on 15 decades of Confederation,? says Mr. Albino. ?As you get to the 11th and 12th chapters, it will be the rise of the retail empires in Canada, which basically happened along Yonge Street with Eaton's and Simpson's. We're talking with other organizations on how to partner together to acquire artefacts and to display.

?It is a big one and we have gotten good feedback so far from Heritage Canada and we're trying to put together a proposal to get it done. On each stage, there is a good reason to say Yonge Street has always been the theme in much of Canadian history. It will probably take several phases of exhibition to get it out and would more than likely involve more than one location. We don't think we can really house all of that here.?

That being said, however, the Aurora Historical Society is giving serious consideration to getting more elbow room outside the confines of its historic redbrick walls. On site, there are two acres behind the house which Mr. Albino says are not used very well.

They hope to soon enter into discussions with the Town to acquire a portion of municipally-owned land behind the Hillary House property line, currently used as storage space for the Parks and Recreation Department, in order to create up to 75 parking spaces to maximize Hillary House's potential as a ?destination.?

If it comes to pass, people visiting Hillary House would be able to come in off Irwin Avenue, turning north on Machell Avenue to park in the new parking lot, taking advantage of a yet-to-be-constructed illuminated walkway leading up to the historic house.

?This is all redundant Town storage space because it is all going to move to Industrial Parkway,? says Mr. Albino. ?Five years ago it was all full of trees, top soil and picnic tables. Now it is redundant. We want to put in a parking lot, clear much of the [growth], have an illuminated walkway so people could use it at night in comfort, and we would have some place where you could have a private party, food service, or barbecue. People have thought about having small concerts and a small stage, anything that would bring people in to enjoy the place, [but] without that land we are nowhere.?