

Memories of Aurora Horse Show hit the road to mark centennial



The Aurora Horse Show might have been put out to pasture in the early 2000s, but memories of one of the community's best-loved events are as strong as ever on the 100th anniversary of its foundation.

To mark the centennial of the first Aurora Horse Show, the Aurora Museum & Archives has launched a new e-book on its history and a new "On Location" exhibit at the Royal Rose Gallery in the Town's historic downtown core.

The Aurora Museum On Location program is a new partnership between the Museum and gallery owner Rosa Calabrese-Teal who has turned her gallery space in the former Caruso's location, into an artistic community hub.

"I always love to get involved in anything that will support community engagement," she says. "Having artefacts in the gallery just elevates to another component of being able to offer something for the community to come in, enjoy artwork that is for sale, but also see the historical aspects and museum-quality pieces that pertain to the Town."

Since the new Aurora Horse Show exhibition was installed, Calabrese-Teal says within two days several patrons had stopped to share their memories of the agricultural event.

"You could see them just standing there, looking at the pieces, with all the emotions coming back – it was amazing to see and it has only been two days," she said on Thursday.

This was music to the ears of Michelle Johnson and Jeremy Hood of the Aurora Museum & Archives, who have had the challenge of commemorating the centennial of the Aurora Horse Show, but without a permanent exhibition space due to ongoing construction at Town Square.

When the gallery space was offered, it was seen as the perfect opportunity.

"We just published our first e-book, which is all about the Horse Show and we did it to align with the 100th anniversary in June of 2023," says Johnson. "Not having a display space right now, it was hard to have a physical component, so when this opportunity presented itself, knowing that we had just done all this research—it seemed like a natural fit to start with this as our first display and get some physical items from our collection into a community space in the centennial year."

The e-book was a long-gestating project for the Museum. At the start of its journey, they put out calls for community members to

share their memories of the venerable event.

“The community really showed up in providing us with photos and artefacts we didn't have before, whether it was through loaning us their images that we could reproduce or some new acquisitions that came in related to the Horse Show,” says Johnson.

Adds Hood: “This is a critical link to the Town's past. It was such a significant part of that early 20th century when Aurora was still a Town of 2,000 and 3,000?. That was a foundational part of the Town's history and a really tangible link. Even though it moved location and the scope changed, the anniversary was something to be celebrated.”

These sentiments were very much reflected in what the community brought to the table, Johnson notes.

A common theme from the submissions they received was just how “beloved” the Aurora Horse Show was during its time, and was something people in Aurora and beyond looked forward to every year.

“It wasn't just the horse show, it was about the Fair and very compelling intergenerational dialogue happened there through the different craft booths that were set up, the different exhibits that were there, for more traditional hobbies like weaving. Events like horse shows and fairs, as we know them today, the ones that are still running, you can still see some of that. The overwhelming sentiment was that it is missed, people missed it, and when we released the e-book, there were some comments it should be brought back. That's how much it is missed.”

Adds Hood: “It was the central event in the summer for the years that it ran, was sorely missed in the wartime years it didn't, was celebrated when it returned. It was a real community event. As the agricultural elements waned, as the fields became subdivisions, other horse shows took to more prominence in the provincial and national stages they were still able to maintain that popularity through the secondary dog show, fair and a variety of other things – the classic car show got talked about a lot. So many other elements that drew people – memories for so many Aurorans.”

The early feedback received by Calabrese-Teal, they agreed, is testament to the Horse Show's power.

“It speaks to the power of the collection to have these archival images and these objects that can evoke that emotional response, a recognizable event like the Aurora Horse Show, of course, but what they are collecting with are the aspects of our collection which have been out of public view for quite some time,” said Johnson. “It's nice to hear that in bringing our collection back into a public space, residents and visitors are connecting with it.”

The exhibition continues through to the end of the month at the Royal Rose Gallery, located on the west side of Yonge Street, just south of Wellington.

For more, including access to the e-book, visit www.aurora.ca/en/Museum/aurora-horse-show.aspx.

By Brock Weir
Editor Local Journalism Initiative Reporter