

Phoenix from the ashes: Exhibition celebrates Aurora United bicentennial



By Brock Weir

They were once sold as fundraisers to support restoration work, but, in a sad twist of fate, these bits and pieces of an old pipe organ, are one of the few remains of what was once Aurora United Church.

But, as Aurora United Church (AUC) works towards becoming that legendary phoenix to rise from the ashes of their April 2014 fire, these pieces of pipe organ have come together to form a very poignant visual reminder of this end goal.

'Phoenix Rising,' a vivid sculptural mixed media piece by AUC parishioner Holly Williamson, forms one of the centrepieces of '200 Years at Tyler and Yonge', a new exhibition which opens this week at the Aurora Museum & Archives.

Marking the bicentennial of what is now the Aurora United Church community, it features an array of archival material salvaged from the burnt out church, pieces from the Museum archives, items recovered over the course of archeological digs on the Yonge and Tyler site ahead of a ground-breaking on a new church facility, and visual displays of what Aurora United Church wants to be over the next 200 years.

The exhibit is co-curated by church historian Helen Roberts, alongside parishioners Mary Smith and Bill Newman. Ms. Roberts and Ms. Smith were hard at work Friday putting the finishing touches on the exhibition, which was set to open June 27 as *The Auroran* went to press.

Looking forward to the Grand Opening, they said they were eager to drive home the message that although the church building was destroyed, the congregation continues to thrive.

'There are people who don't even know we're still around, but the building burned down, the church did not,' says Ms. Roberts. 'The congregation is still alive and kicking, well, and moving forward. The building's gone, but there have already been three buildings on the property, and the journey continues.'

The 'Journey' is very much the driving force behind this exhibition, highlighting the journey from its very beginning as Tyler's Meeting House in 1818, founded by landowner William Tyler.

'Our 200th Anniversary committee came together and worked out a theme,' says Ms. Roberts. We wanted to look at what the church has really stood for over 200 years other than worship. We decided a lot of it was service - service to the community, world service, and service to each other.'

This is highlighted in many areas, from the 'reach out' programs AUC has spearheaded over the years benefiting the community both locally and abroad, as well as the Rise & Shine Breakfast, a weekly meal bringing together food and fellowship that continued without missing a beat little more than 12 hours after the fire.

'We look at this as a journey,' says Ms. Roberts. 'It starts in 1818 and, in 2018, it is still continuing into our church building.'

As an AUC member, Ms. Smith has been along for 50 years of this journey and, when the opportunity popped up to be a part of this commemoration, she says she jumped at the chance.

'As a member for 50 years, the church means a lot to me,' says Ms. Smith. 'It just felt very dear to my heart to celebrate the 200th anniversary and thought I could help. I had no experience in this kind of thing, but I thought I could be the gopher! Helen was the knowledge and I did a lot of things to just help, which is good, because we need lots of help.'

A great deal of help also came from Shawna White, Curator of the Aurora Museum & Archives, as well as the Museum's Michelle Johnson, who aided with the mural-like timelines, panels, and provided pointers on how to properly display the artefacts in this new setting.

But these artefacts are only a fragment of what could have been. Ms. Roberts was tasked with stewarding an abundance of materials related to the church, including original framed plans for the last church building, but much of this went up in smoke.

What survived, however, provides a tangible link to the past.

"We have the 1878 account book from the trustees who were in charge of building the 1878 building, which is, of course, the one that burned down," says Ms. Roberts. "We had the minute book from that same group. The minute book disappeared in the fire, but the account book survived; they were identical books and they were in the same place, so I don't know why one lived and one did not. We were looking at the women's organizations items: we have the treasurer's accounts from the 1800s where she collected the money and sent it to the National church in Toronto and they sent a receipt back to her. It is amazing the number of things that just pop up at you. We also have the charter for the Third Aurora Scouts, which is 60 years old this year, and that survived the fire and that is kind of special to have."

Rounding out the exhibition is an original coat belonging to a "saddlebag preacher", the type of which would have originally served Tyler's Meeting House, featuring a formal coat with a pocket in the tails in which to snugly hold a bible; an original choir robe that survived the fire; documents charting AUC's war dead; and, found in the archaeological dig, a glass jar top from a company in Hamilton, and a small "Frozen Charlotte" doll which served as a cautionary tale to Victorian youngsters.

By the time the new church is built, the curators hope Ms. Williamson's piece will find a place in the new building.

"The whole theme of Phoenix Rising from the Flames is so meaningful to our church - rising from the ashes and becoming a new creation," says Ms. Smith.

"The spirit of [reaching out] is still there and it is still working," notes Ms. Roberts.

200 Years at Yonge & Tyler is on now through October 1. The Aurora Museum & Archives is located at 22 Church Street inside the Church Street School.