

TIME TRAVELLER'S DIARY: Four sisters, two hired men, and 300 chickens

By Jacqueline Stuart

On an October day in 1930 the Time Traveller decided to hike up Yonge to Cosford's Corners. He knew that one day the sideroad there would be called St. John's, and he had just learned the source of the future name.

Walking west along the dirt road he soon came to a fine frame house on the north side. He recalled that the Pearsons had built it in the 1860s or earlier, but it had been in the Walker family since 1875. And now the hundred-acre farm had been purchased by the Sisterhood of St. John the Divine, according to the chatter he had heard that morning. What would these devout Anglican ladies do with a farm?

The Sisterhood's main areas of service were caring for the elderly, caring for the sick, and education. They needed a new convent to replace their existing home in downtown Toronto, and also space for a new convalescent hospital. In the end, neither a convent nor a hospital was built on the Aurora site.

Initially four of the sisters moved to the farm. Two hired men looked after the farming operation, which included livestock, grain, fruit, vegetables, and 300 chickens. The farm helped supply the needs of the Sisterhood's downtown facilities.

A year later, a few guests paid to stay at the peaceful location on the hill and in 1932 some convalescing patients were accommodated. The Sisterhood was familiar with this sort of care: it had been operating a convalescent hospital in Toronto since 1920 and had decided to build a new facility on Cummer Avenue. (That institution survives today as St. John's Rehab)

At Aurora, a new service was undertaken in 1935: the training of girls with intellectual disabilities. Each girl was given one hour of handiwork a day and a task to accomplish. Some learned to read and write, and no doubt many enjoyed the contact with the farm animals.

A two-storey addition was made to the farmhouse in 1941, allowing the accommodation of the working sisters, three invalid sisters, the girls in the education program, and occasional visitors. A chapel was also built.

In 1955, it was decided to end the work with the girls and, in fact, to give up the property. Several parcels were sold to private owners but over half of the land went to the Toronto diocese of the Anglican church. The diocese opened the Anglican Conference Centre on the site, providing meeting space and associated residential accommodation.

Over the years, demand for the Centre declined and the buildings fell into disrepair. It was decided to close the Centre and all the structures were demolished in about 2000.

Today the first signs of a subdivision, Shining Hill, are appearing north of the former Anglican property. The project may eventually take over most of the St. John's site, and much more. The woodlands may vanish but the name will live on in the sideroad, stretching far beyond the original location of St. John's, the peaceful place on the hill.