

TIME TRAVELLER'S DIARY: Spies in Aurora

By Jacqueline Stuart

The time traveller must have been quite glad, that day in 1911, that he was not an actual person as his spirit accompanied Mr. Herbert W. Fleury and Sir William Mulock as they trudged up a hill that was not especially steep, but relentless and muddy. When they reached the top, they could see Yonge Street below them to the east, with fields to the east of that, and to the south-east the rooftops of Aurora. The time traveller knew that in a few decades much of the space between the hill top and the town would be covered with buildings of one sort or another, but the two gentlemen had something more rustic in mind: an apple orchard. Sir William was an experienced orchardist and declared that the location was ideal for such an enterprise. The two men purchased the land the following year and in 1914 ?sold? it to their company, Aurora Orchards Limited. Preparation of the ground had started as soon as they had access to the property and over time some seven thousand apple trees were planted, about a third of them Spies. Fortunately, neither Mr. Fleury nor Sir William depended on the orchard for his income: it was some ten years before the apples were sold commercially, mainly through large stores. Herbert Fleury was the co-owner and active manager of the Fleury foundry in Aurora, manufacturing ploughs and other agricultural equipment which was sold across Canada and beyond. Sir William was Chief Justice of the Exchequer when the orchard began and later became Chief Justice of Ontario, but the work closest to his heart may have been his farm at the north-west corner of Yonge and what is today Mulock Drive, in Newmarket.

While probably both men kept in close touch with what was going on at the orchard, day-to-day operations were looked after by a manager. For over twenty years that person was William S. Calhoun, and he had worked there for many years before that. Roy Fierheller, a cousin of Mr. Calhoun, also worked at the orchard for a time.

Which sensible man decided that they would allow the boys of St. Andrew's College to have access to a few trees, so long as they left the rest alone?

The disastrous growing season of 1945 has gone down in the annals of Ontario apple-growing. With careful management and, perhaps, some good luck, Aurora Orchards did produce some fruit that year, although of lower quality than usual. When they made apples available one Monday in December they were overwhelmed with visitors, some from great distances. They were able to serve about ninety customers (and use a tractor to pull some cars out of the muddy lane) but had to turn away more than two hundred.

Aurora Orchards was sold in 1958. Herbert Fleury had died in 1940, William Mulock in 1944, and William Calhoun in 1955. Aurora was growing and Aurora Orchards gradually became Orchard Heights. But even today, if you walk the trails running off the western end of Orchard Heights Boulevard, you will come across the odd apple tree: a little beyond the end of the orchard, but perhaps the old business found a way to leave a reminder of its existence.