

TIME TRAVELLER'S DIARY: ?The worst place inside the corporation?

By Jacqueline Stuart

Head of rail! May 16, 1853 must have been an exciting day in town when Ontario's first ?revenue? railway train, carrying fare-paying passengers and freight, arrived in Aurora from Toronto. You can read about it on the plaque in the tiny parkette at the station. Then have a seat on a bench and look over at the building on the north side of Wellington, hard up against the east side of the tracks.

It was hoped that the railway would be a boon to local business and thus to the village as a whole. Landowners on the north and south sides of Wellington Street between the railway and Yonge Street subdivided their properties into village building lots in anticipation of a growth in population.

Among the early purchasers on the north side was John Kirsopp, a farmer. He was not going to farm on his new property: it was only half an acre in size (one fifth of a hectare) and was closely bordered on the west by the railway tracks and on the south by Wellington Street. On this site he erected the Railroad Hotel, which he would own for twenty years although it was often managed by others.

The hotel's main entrance was on the west side, just steps from the tracks, and its outline can still be seen. A second floor gallery, long gone, ran the length of the same side. Anyone old enough to remember the terrifying thrill of being enveloped in a cloud of steam from a pre-diesel railway engine might wonder who would want to sit on that balcony, but it was by no means unique among rail-side hotels.

Who stayed at a hotel like this? Commercial travellers were a prime source of revenue for small station hotels: think of the opening scene of the film ?The Music Man? in which the travelling salesmen talk to the beat of the clickety-clack of the train on the track. There were three further owners of the Railroad Hotel following Mr. Kirsopp. The third was Frank Button, who bought the property in 1881.

Mr. Button's wife, Dinah, died suddenly in 1887, aged only forty-eight, and this loss may have hastened his decline and fall. He was already suffering financial problems and his mortgage was in default.

There were also problems with the law, which came to a head about a year after Mrs. Button's death. Frank Button was found guilty of selling whisky without a licence. He could not pay the fine and would have gone to jail had a son not paid for his freedom. The editor of the local paper commented: ?It seems somewhat strange that this den at the east end cannot be shut up. It is without doubt the worst place inside the corporation.?

The hotel was sold after nine years in Button ownership. Although the next owner dutifully applied for a liquor licence, it was denied. The Railway Hotel became a boarding house, and later a private home, and for a long time now has accommodated small businesses. Still, its sturdy, well maintained, and perfectly respectable presence takes us back to an important moment in Aurora's, and Ontario's, history.