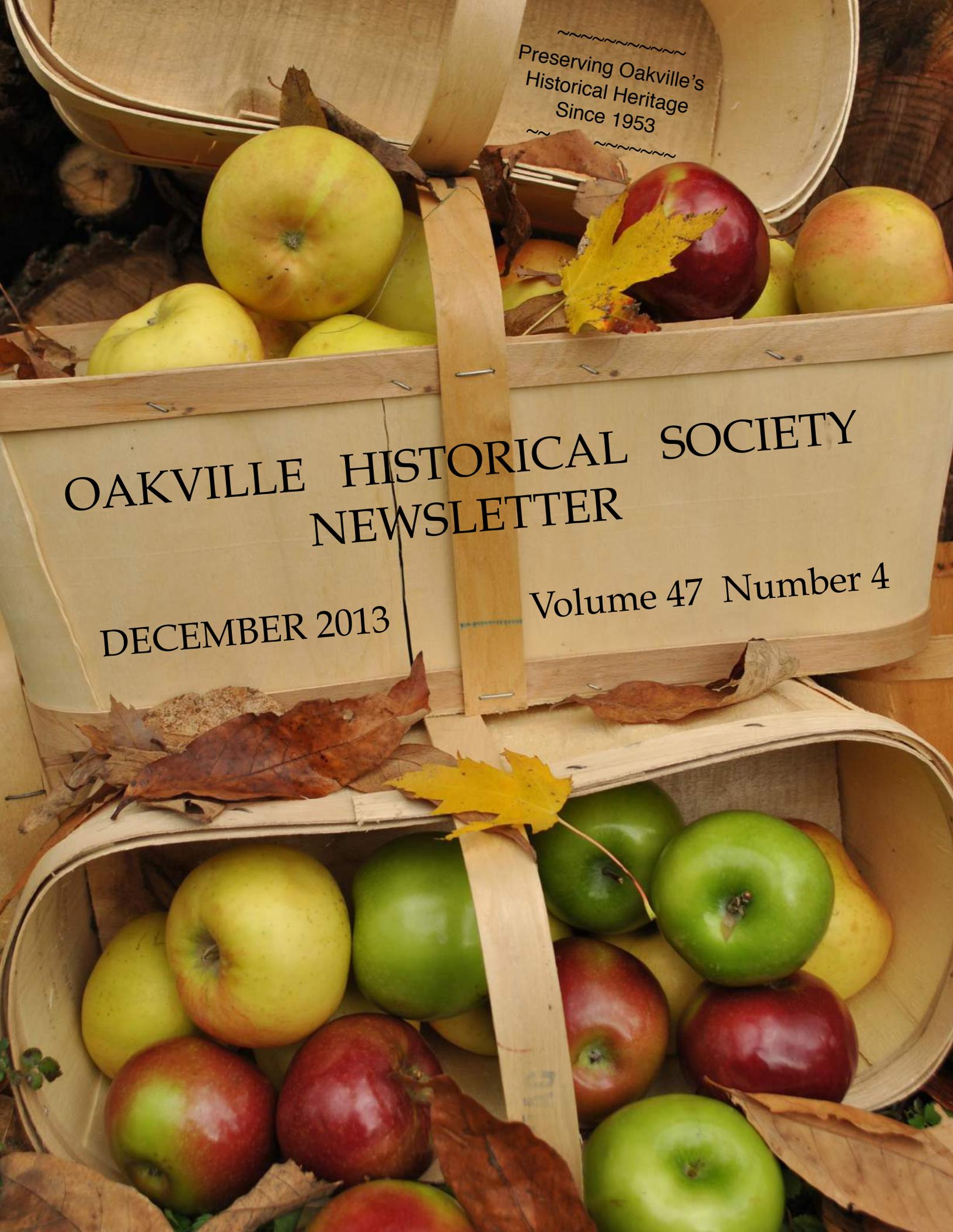


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Preserving Oakville's  
Historical Heritage  
Since 1953  
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OAKVILLE HISTORICAL SOCIETY
NEWSLETTER

DECEMBER 2013

Volume 47 Number 4



PUBLIC SPEAKERS & EVENTS

**Friday
December 6
6 - 9 pm** **Annual OHS Wine and Cheese at the Society office, 110 King St.
A good chance to meet your OHS friends with a glass of wine and
tasty nibbles.**

**Thursday, 21st December is the last day the OHS office is open in 2013. It re-opens
Tuesday, 7th Jan 2014.**

2014

**Wednesday
February 19** **Hon. Col. Gerald Haddon will speak about the history of Canadian
Aviation and specifically of his grandfather, J.A.D. McCurdy.**

**Wednesday
April 16** **Mr. Terry Reardon, author, will speak about his latest book,
*Winston Churchill and MacKenzie King So Similar-So Different.***

**Saturday
May 10** **Annual Yard Sale 110 King St.
Please think of donating to the sale when you are culling your
treasures. Phone us to arrange pick-up if needed.**

**Wednesday
May 21** **Ms. Birch is the author of *Settlement* a story of romance and
adventure set in Upper Canada in 1836-37. She speaks about the
challenges of re-creating a long-ago world and making a case for
historical fiction.
“Ann Birch has worked for a decade in Toronto’s finest old houses as
an historical interpreter. She can tell you why table knives had
rounded edges, why candles had to be stored in metal safes at night
and why even the best people seldom bathed.”**

Speakers are presented at St. John’s United Church, Dunn and Randall Streets at 7:30 pm

Some Sites of Interest

Sheridan College at the Thomas House http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W_2gX0_jwDg

History at the Thomas House <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LP-Q7jeBsec>

A house is moved in Bronte <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VCjIkfJCIi8>



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PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

It never ceases to amaze me how busy our Society is. There always seems to be some new or continuing initiative and some get more mention than others. In this issue's comments, I'd like to mention some of them.

Web Site Re-design This has been going on for a while and we think we're getting closer to rolling out our new website. I'd like to thank Yacoub Husseini for all his work over the past year or so. After conducting a Christmas photo shoot at the Thomas House, Yacoub offered to help us update the website. He has met with the board several times and we're getting closer to the release.

Social Media We've had a Facebook page created by Debbie Dunn and now maintained by Gillian Schnurr. You can have a look at it by going to www.facebook.com/oakvillehistoricalsociety. We also have a twitter account **@oakvillehistory**

Ghost Walks This just keeps growing under the leadership of Wendy Belcher and Mary Davidson. Final figures aren't available yet but the walks have become a major source of income for the Society. This year we acquired several new walk leaders, some new to the Society, and several new volunteers. We're just about maxed out on capacity closer to Hallowe'en. The walks have also brought us some new members.

Historical Walks While we didn't offer scheduled walks this year because of a major decline in interest, we are seeing an increase in the number of requests for walks for special groups. Most recently I took a group of 29 members of the University Women's Club on a walk which was followed by a catered lunch. The same day I took out a group of Grade 7 students from a Montessori School. This past fall we held the first of our walks at the Oakville and St Mary's Cemetery.

Collection Margaret Buxton was observing recently that she's just about caught up on bringing items into the collection. We can't have that! New items continue to arrive one way or another. If you hear of something that might be appropriate for our collection, please let us know. Photos, documents, appropriate newspaper articles and etc. can all be brought into the collection.

Archival Storage As time permits we keep plugging away at moving items in the collection to our storage facility at Queen Elizabeth Park Community and Cultural Centre.

Exhibits Congratulations to Rosemary Seeton and her group on the new exhibit at the office. Greg Munz is currently working on a display featuring the research and fabrication of our signature historic building plaques. We still have a lot of work to do in educating the community that our plaques do not cause or show any kind of heritage designation.

On-line Access to the Collection This is an area that we really need to get working on.

Thomas House The number of visitors and cash put in the donation box are both up significantly this year. Thanks to Jamie Macrae, most of the exterior of the building has been repainted. The painting will be completed in the spring.

Memories Project A dedicated group under June Hitchcox, Margaret Godefroy and Hugh Ramsay continue to plug away at this project and publication is getting closer.

I've probably left something out as there are just so many projects going on. If you would like to become more involved with the activities of the Society or have ideas or suggestions, it's your society – speak up.

Unfortunately, I'll be missing the annual members' get-together this year as I'll be travelling.

George Chisholm, President

THE OAKVILLE BASKET FACTORY

A former brewery building built around 1866 was the first location of the basket factory when William Bigger Chisholm and Charles Pettit Chisholm began production in 1874 on the shore of the Sixteen Mile Creek on Trafalgar Road. After fires twice destroyed buildings, the factory was built on a 5 acre site just south of the railroad tracks on what is now Cornwall Road, west of Trafalgar. A water wheel was the source of power in the first buildings but in the new location it was a large steam engine that powered the machinery. It was in this building that baskets were produced until 1984 and where John Sawyer toiled in the summer of 1971. His recollections follow.



The Oakville Basket Factory, final location

It smelled sour and earthy. Not entirely unpleasant or overwhelming, the smell of fermenting hardwood still lingers in my memory.

It is hard to believe the summer of 1971 was over 40 years ago. About to graduate from White Oaks High School, I needed to find a summer job to earn my tuition for Sheridan College. For many generations my family worked in the lumber trade and I had experience harvesting and working with lumber.

I assumed that was why Mr. Stevenson, the manager of the Oakville Basket Factory, hired me as a student labourer. He was a tall man in his late fifties or early sixties with a gruff, no nonsense manner. His thinning, grey hair was combed back in the style of the 1950s and I had the impression he was more than a little bit frugal. The pay was \$2.35 an hour, not a great wage, but better than the minimum at the time and enough that I could save for my tuition.

Agriculture was once a key part of Oakville's economy and farmers needed baskets to pack and ship their crops. For many years the Oakville Basket Factory manufactured and distributed baskets to local farms, throughout the country and into the northern United States. Until the opening of Ford's Oakville assembly plant in 1953 the basket factory was arguably the Town's highest profile business. Outside of the community Oakville was known as the place where wooden baskets were made.

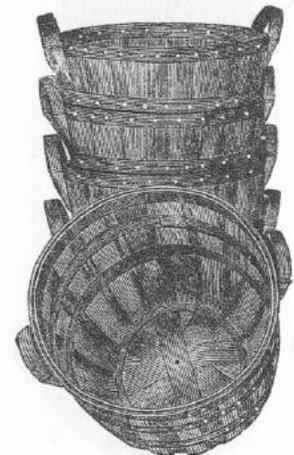


The factory was located on the west side of Trafalgar Road where Cornwall Road is today. It was old, dirty and looked very much like the photos taken of the factory at the turn of the last century that the Historical Society has on file. Everything was starkly utilitarian. Aesthetics were not a consideration in the construction of the facility. The core of the factory was made of poured concrete and a number of rough additions and outbuildings had been erected over the years.

Working the night shift my interaction with other staff was limited. I did work the day shift for a few weeks and had the opportunity to see the entire manufacturing process. During the day most of the factory workers were first generation Italian or Portuguese women. There were a few men who did the heavy manual work at the beginning of the manufacturing process.

One of the characters I recall was Frank who was in charge of “security”. He was one of the few people on the property that was well dressed and one of the last people around who still wore a fedora. His hat was usually tipped back or tilted to the side like a Clark Gable or Humphrey Bogart character. Frank made a point of telling me about the time he spent in prison for armed robbery, his adventures running from the police and how they finally captured him. His stated intent was to keep me on the straight and narrow. I remember asking why there would be a need for security - was there a problem with basket thieves? He said because the site was very large, open, not fenced and with several entrances, things did disappear from time to time. Frank also said there was often thousands of dollars in the office as many of the farmers paid the company in cash for their baskets.

A unique feature of the factory was that its primary source of power came from a large reciprocating steam engine. You can still see its remains; they have been preserved on the south side of Cornwall Road between 16 Mile Creek and Trafalgar Road. The boiler that created the steam for the engine was heated by burning waste wood from the manufacturing process.



3 Bushel Basket.

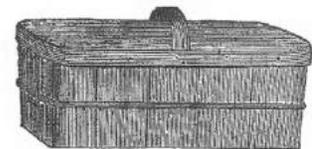
The steam engine brings me to the second character I clearly recall. His name was Jim, a Scotsman who looked as old as the factory, although he was probably not much older than I am today. Jim was a short, slight, bald man with a thick brogue. A stationary engineer, he was responsible for operating and maintaining the steam engine. With the hot summer weather and the heat from the fire, Jim was always covered in perspiration. As we shoveled waste wood into the boiler, he explained the devastation that could result if the pressure in the boiler was not carefully controlled. The resulting explosion would level the building. Jim told me the basket factory was the last steam powered factory in Ontario.



Wheel before the move across Cornwall Road.

Raw hardwood logs, predominately maple, were delivered to the factory. The logs were cut into four foot lengths at the factory and then loaded onto sturdy carts. The carts were wheeled into large concrete and metal steam boxes. I estimate the steam boxes were six feet high, six feet wide and ten feet deep. The logs were steamed for 24 hours and when they were removed from the steam box their bark was stripped off.

The logs were then mounted on a peeler. Picture a giant lathe with a large log spinning on it. A very sharp steel blade would be forced against the spinning log and it would peel off a thin veneer of wood. The wood veneer was still green and wet so it had to be dried in a large kiln. The constant supply of wet wood accounted for the distinctive smell of the factory. After they were dried the sheets of veneer were sliced on a guillotine into the various sizes needed to form the baskets. Up until this point of the process most of the work was done by the men.



12 Quart Fruit Basket.



10 lb. Grape Basket.

The bottoms of the baskets were manufactured off-site and shipped to the factory on pallets. They were made of poplar, a light weight, readily available species that had few other commercial uses so it was relatively inexpensive. Most of the assembly process was completed by the women. They used foot operated industrial staplers to attach the various pieces of the



Medium or Deep Clothes Basket

basket together. I remember spending a few days stapling handles onto baskets. It was tedious, repetitive work.

I was fascinated with the ancient printing press that was used to stamp the names of the farms on the end of the baskets. There was a machine shop on the property where blades were sharpened, parts were made and equipment was repaired. One of my duties was to operate a machine that formed one pint cardboard berry boxes. I remember the pride with which Tony, the supervisor, told me that the machine was designed and built at the factory by the staff in the machine shop.

Wooden baskets had been made by various companies in Oakville since the mid-1800s. I suspect a number of factors contributed to the demise of the industry here in Oakville. There were the rapidly increasing costs of wood and labour. It would have been hard to compete with alternative materials such as cardboard and plastics and automated manufacturing processes. There were also changes in agricultural practices, shipping, distribution channels and retailing that reduced the need for wooden baskets. Changing land use in the area and quickly increasing land values would have contributed to making the operation of the factory an inefficient use of the site.

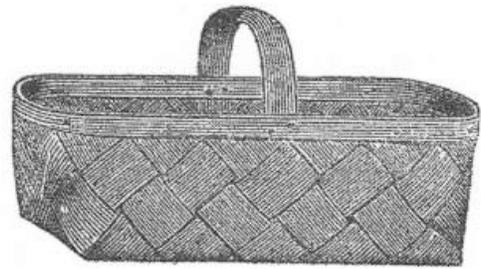
In 1984, I recall reading with some sadness in the *Oakville Beaver* that after many years of providing steady jobs and profile to our community, the Oakville Basket Factory had quietly closed its doors. I still smile whenever I see a wooden fruit basket.



John Sawyer is the President of the Oakville Chamber of Commerce. He grew up in Oakville, and is a proud graduate of Sheridan College.

John assures us that the baskets he is holding in the photo above, in front of the wheel at its new location on the south side of Cornwall Road are virtually identical to the ones he manufactured in 1971.

Before self-serve stores had become popular there were no metal carts on wheels for customers. A grocer served customers at the counter and the shopper picked up a Market Basket. They were about 12” wide, 20” long and 10” deep (30 x 50 x 25 cm) and made of woven rattan-type of material in strips about 2” (5 cm) wide. The grocery to first use these baskets was Loblaw's, newly opened on the south side of Colborne (Lakeshore Rd). These baskets were soon known as “Loblaw's” baskets regardless of what they contained or where they were used. At the time of introduction, circa 1930, \$5.00 worth of groceries would fill up one of them.



No. 4 Market Basket.



Max Auwaerter, Lesley Anderson and in front, Leah Thompson

The Ghosts of Oakville returned for another successful spooky season. The Society hosted 36 evening walks plus six afternoon bus tours for seniors. Thanks to Mary Davidson and her caterers who lit the lanterns and kept the cookies and hot cocoa coming; thanks to Max Auwaerter, Lesley Anderson and Leah Thompson for roaming the streets in character and a big thanks to our ghosts - Wendy Belcher (Esther Thomas), Curtis Belcher (John Thomas), Philip Brimacombe (Merrick Thomas), Daniel Fassler (Robert Murray Thomas), Carol Gall (Jacques the Buccanner), Pat Mack (Alice of the Oakville Centre), Stewart Sherriff (Peter McDougald), Kelly Pardy (Mrs. Wilson - Capt Robert's mother), Kelsey Levine (Elizabeth Wilson - Capt Robert's sister).

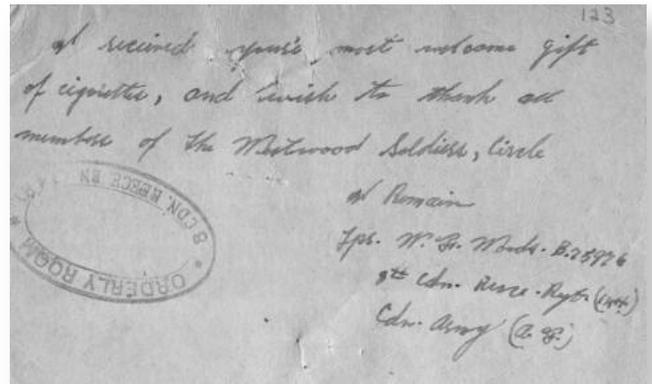
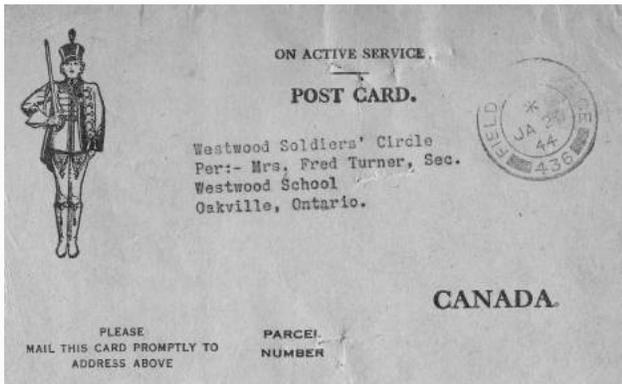
GHOST WALKS



Daniel Fassler, left and Pat Mack

WE WELCOME VISITORS

Mrs. Mary Woods, shown at right, recently dropped in to view our archives. Her husband, **W. Woods**, while serving overseas during WWII received gifts from the students of Westwood School. Enclosed was a self-addressed card, shown below, on which the recipient expressed his appreciation. We gave her copies of the three cards that her late husband had signed.

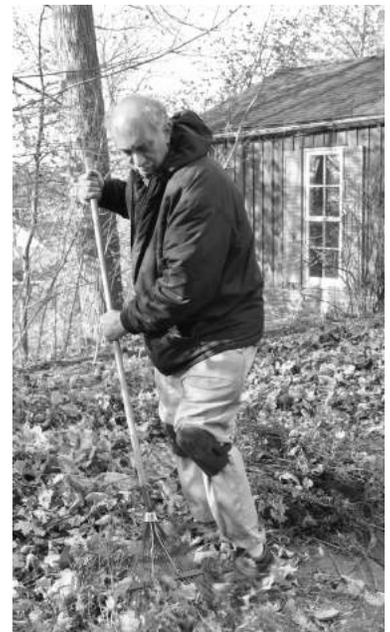


FALL CLEAN-UP



Lance Naismith, left and Mary Davidson

The word went out and a dozen OHS volunteers showed up with rakes to herd the leaves to the curb. Thank you! Many hands make light work!



Stan Smurlick

MEMBERSHIP

Once again it's time to renew your membership. We ask you to please complete and detach this form and return it by mail or in person to our office. Thank you for your continued interest in and support of our work. We hope that you will enjoy the benefits of membership in the Oakville Historical Society.

Andrea Stewart, Memberships Secretary

Name.....

Address.....

.....

.....

Email.....

MEMBERSHIP CATAGORIES AND FEES

Family	\$ 35.00	<input type="checkbox"/>
Individual	25.00	<input type="checkbox"/>
Student (Full-time)	15.00	<input type="checkbox"/>
Senior (65 or over)	20.00	<input type="checkbox"/>
Senior Family	25.00	<input type="checkbox"/>
Institutional	35.00	<input type="checkbox"/>
Supporting	55.00	<input type="checkbox"/>
Corporate	100.00	<input type="checkbox"/>

Become a Supporting Member and receive a tax receipt for the excess over your regular fee.

**P.O. Box 69501, 109 Thomas Street, Oakville,
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RECENT SPEAKER



Mr. John McKenty, shown above, author of *Canada Cycle & Motor Co.: The CCM Story*, gave a lively and informative talk on the history of CCM from its founding in 1899 to its eventual demise in 1983.

The company was created as a result of the merger of several smaller bicycle companies at a time when American companies intended to open branch plants. The first President was Walter Massey of the well known Massey family. He had business experience with mergers, and had the support of many prominent Canadian bankers and businessmen who served on the executive and the board of directors.

Over time, the company diversified its products by introducing motorized forms of transportation including the automobile under the name of 'The Russell'.

In 1905 the company began the production of hockey skates using scrap metal from their plants. Initially, blades and boots were manufactured separately and had to be assembled by the buyer. Mr. McKenty displayed one of the blades from his personal collection of memorabilia. CCM skates were advertised as the 'king of all skates for fast hockey' and were used by all levels of amateur and professional hockey teams.

For the members of the audience, who had owned either skates and/or bicycles, it was a nostalgic reminder of this iconic Canadian brand. *May Isaac*

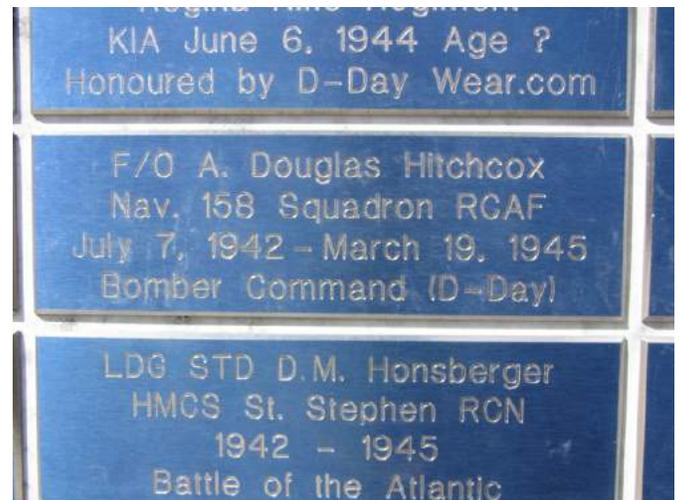
WE WILL REMEMBER



Mark Hitchcox indicating his father's plaque at the Juno Beach Centre

Mark Hitchcox (left), son of **Douglas Hitchcox** whom we wrote about in June 2013, sent us photos from his recent visit to the Juno Beach Centre. He writes -

“...the highlight of the visit was to see Dad's name on his brick. To the extent that Dad doesn't have a grave marker anywhere, this served as a physical reminder to the world of his existence and of one of the roles he played during his too-brief time on this planet. It was hard for me to leave when it came time to go.”



F/O A. Douglas Hitchcox plaque shown larger, right

Mr. Alan Ernest (right) has been contracted by the Town of Oakville to repair headstones including those at Oakville St. Mary's Cemetery on Lyons Lane. The Society recently conducted tours for the Bronte Grandmothers for Africa and Alan was on hand to answer questions about his work. One query was, why are there small stones atop some headstones? Are they placed by a visitor to show respect to the deceased? Are they placed at Jewish graves to keep the soul down? We asked Alan his opinion. His thoughtful, considered reply was, “I put them there to indicate which headstones need my attention.”



THE WAY WE WERE



Oakville Historical Society

110 King Street, Oakville

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Third Sunday of the month 12:30 to 4:00 pm

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