

Oakville Historical
Society
since 1953



Historical Society News

www.oakvillehistory.org



Growing Up at Holyrood

Volume 53 Number 4

December 2019

Speakers

19th February, 2020

Kelly Mathews *The Road to Marylake*

In 1910, Sir Henry Mill Pellatt, one of Edwardian Canada's wealthiest men, started building his famed Casa Loma in Toronto. At the same time, he also started work on his country farm and estate in King Township called Lake Marie.

Speakers Nights are held at St. John's Church, at the corner of Dunn and Randall Streets at 7:30 pm. Enter from Randall. All welcome, donations accepted and refreshments served.

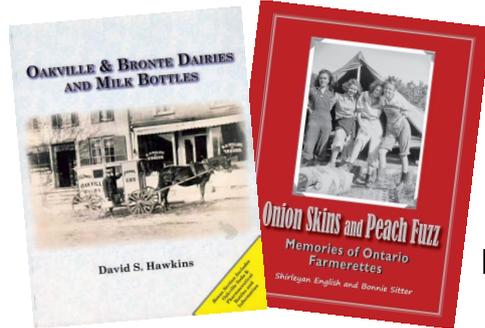
AGM

18th March, 2020

Join your fellow OHS members at St. John's Church: 6:00 pm for a potluck supper, and Annual General Meeting at 7:30. Voice your opinion on all society matters. Mingle with fellow members.

Christmas Closing

Our Offices at 110 King St. will be closed at 4:30, 19th December and will open again at 1:00, 7th January 2020.



**New
Books
With
Local
Interest**

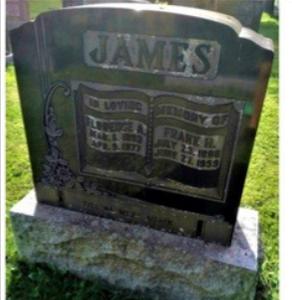
Oakville & Bronte Dairies and Milk Bottles by David S. Hawkins, available at OHS office. *Onions Skins and Peach Fuzz Memories of Ontario Farmerettes* by Shirlean English and Bonnie Sitter, available at bookstores and from authors.



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A note from the OHS President

What is probably our busiest time of the year is just over—Ghost Walks. The walks are a great way for us to introduce ourselves to well over 600 people, most of whom have never visited us before. They've now had some exposure to the history of Oakville. We couldn't do it without the involvement of dozens of volunteers: walk leaders; cashiers; greeters; caterers; wandering spirits (many of them high school students) and local residents who twitch curtains and create silhouettes behind them. Mary Davidson, Marie Descent, Wendy Belcher and their organizing group have done another fantastic job.

An interesting item came into the collection courtesy of the estate of Harry Barrett. Hiding in one of many cupboards was a 16mm film from the 1970s on Halton Region. We'll be having a screening of this and will make a decision on whether or not to have it digitized. We have several other films in 8mm and Super 8mm. Having them scanned is expensive.

You may have noticed an increase in the number of our black and white plaques around town. Our plaques do not imply any kind of heritage designation, but show pride in ownership and give a bit of history. If you're interested in a plaque for yourself or as a gift there's further information on our website. As a bonus, non-members who purchase a plaque receive a free one-year membership in the Society.

For great Christmas gifts, look no further than our selection of books and maps on Oakville. There's further information on them on our website.

I hope to see many members at our annual wine and cheese event. If we don't cross paths there I hope you have a great holiday season with family and friends.

George Chisholm, OHS President



Congratulations to Greg Munz (above, fourth from left) on managing the successful production of a new set of banners. Last year you may have seen at George's Square a set of three banners on the First World War. In addition, this year he has installed two sets of three banners each, on Peacekeeping. Another First War set is at Town Hall and the third is up on the front lawn at St John's. Thanks to Sue Hobson for applying her considerable design skills to the project. Thanks to the following for their support in making it possible: Micheal Johnson, the Oakville Museum, the Town of Oakville and Halton Heritage Services.

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Growing Up at Holyrood

By Patricia Stephenson

Roy Lessels snaps a photo of his youngest adult son Michael, wearing a cap and winter coat, a walking stick clasped firmly in his hand. To Michael's right is one of two roughly-cut grey stone pillars with crenellated tops, planted at the foot of Holyrood Avenue. The pillars, taller than an average doorway, originally stood guard at the entrance to the Holyrood Estate on Highway 2 (now Lakeshore Road)—the place where Roy Lessels was born.

"The pillars are now in their third location," says Lessels. He recalls when they once stood a mere few steps away from the highway. As a boy in the late 1930s and early '40s, he and his dog Stupie waited beside those pillars—every day. "I was waiting for *The Toronto Daily Star* truck to deliver our evening paper," he says. Once delivered, his English springer spaniel carried the newspaper home.

Years earlier, when Roy Lessels's parents Alice and John (known as Jack) Lessels, arrived at Holyrood in 1929, those same pillars would have been the first glimpse they had of their employer Gordon and Kathleen Lefebvres' estate. Jack Lessels had been hired as groundskeeper and the couple would live at the estate. Roy Lessels explains that his father's prior experience as groundskeeper at the Dunnikier Estate in Kirkcaldy, Scotland, made him a good candidate for the Holyrood position. His parents had immigrated to Canada from Scotland in 1924—first his father, followed by his mother a few months later. They married in Toronto.

Roy Lessels says that his father began his groundskeeper's position at Holyrood in the same year that the Lefebvres had purchased the estate. Among the Lefebvres many renovations to their house (originally built in 1867 to serve as rectory for St. Jude's Anglican Church), included an apartment above a newly built three-car garage

The relationship between employer and employee at Holyrood was informal, recalls Roy Lessels. "There was no 'Mister this' or 'Mister that'—it was just Gordon and Jack." His mother had fondly called Mrs. Lefebvre "Mrs. L," which might explain how it came to be that Roy Lessels was born in his parents' employers' house. The story goes that when it came time for Alice Lessels to give birth to her first-born child in 1930, Mrs. Lefebvre suggested that she might be more comfortable staying in a guestroom at Holyrood House. She took Mrs. Lefebvre up on the offer.

In November 1931, after Alice and Jack Lessels had lived in Canada for seven years, the Lessels family returned to Scotland for a visit. While in Scotland, says Roy Lessels, he was baptised Jack Roy in the Church of Scotland, and his younger brother Alistair was born. In March of '32 the family boarded the S.S. Montcalm in Greenock, Scotland and sailed back to Canada, arriving nine days later at Halifax Harbour.

The Lessels family had been living in a gardener's cottage on the estate since 1931. The Lefebvres had had the cottage built especially for them. The two-bedroom bungalow, with cedar-shingled roof and siding, was built beside an apple orchard with a view of the lake. Roy Lessels recalls that "it could get pretty cold at the cottage in the winter." In those early years, he says, they depended on their woodstove for heat. On occasion, they would receive help from John Jackson, right-hand man at the Skoog farm across the road. "John was a close family friend and our babysitter from time to time. He would come over to the cottage on cold winter mornings and get the kitchen stove going—the cottage was never locked." In time, says Lessels, he and his brother took on the job of chopping the firewood

after supper. The wood was stacked next to the cottage under a window, and during those dark winter evenings, his father would direct his reading lamp to shine through the window and onto the wood pile. “We would fill the wheelbarrow and place it outside the kitchen door [to be used] for morning stove lighting.” Eventually, they had a propane stove, and a coal furnace that was brought into the cottage in the fall. “Thank God the cottage had water and electricity [for lighting]!” he says. Still, they kept an oil lamp handy just in case the electricity went out.

Childhood friends were mostly from neighbouring properties—the Seal and the Soanes families (Mrs. Soanes was Mrs. Lefebvre’s sister). Also included in the Lessels boys’ circle of friends were groundskeepers’ children from other estates. He remembers enjoying his boyhood activities and outings: the camaraderie of Boy Scouts and Sea Scouts, and attending the Gregory Theatre with his brother and mother, where they saw live performances and films. “Mrs. Gregory sold the tickets—Mr. Gregory took them from patrons.” He recalls the lively “Teen Town” dances held at Victoria Hall on the weekends, where he says, “we would take our own 78 records with us.”

Roy Lessels began his schooling at Westwood Public School. He recalls the long walk to get there and the detour that he and his brother took through a marshy ravine area known as the Kerr Street gully. When he attended Central School, he liked to walk along the old Radial Bridge that stretched from Rebecca Street across the Sixteen Mile Creek. From the bridge, looking south, he had a clear view of the dump on the east side of the creek and Burke’s Auto Wrecking, a salvage yard on the west bank. Later, he attended Oakville High School. In all, he says, “Those were enjoyable days.”

Lessels grew up watching his father take particular care of the estate grounds—a role that went well beyond manicuring its many lawns and gardening its park-like setting. His father also maintained the pool, a red-clay tennis court and



Roy Lessels on the diving board at Holyrood.

greenhouse. When Lessels and his brother were old enough to help out, they assisted their father. He remembers vividly the labour-intensive work.

“In those days” says Lessels, “the pool was filled with lake water.” A filler pipe, extended out into the lake. The diving board, he explains, was made of wood and wrapped in burlap to prevent the diver from slipping. “When draining the pool, you had to follow the receding water with stable brooms to remove any algae. When empty you had to hose the whole pool down. The pool had to be drained and cleaned every couple of weeks!” He adds, “My brother and I helped Dad clean the pool many times.”

“When the Lefebvres owned the property, our family was free to use the pool and tennis court while they were away—and they seemed to be away a lot.” Lessels doesn’t recall this same courtesy extended by the next three owners of Holyrood for whom his father continued to work as groundskeeper until 1954. Still, living at Holyrood had its advantages. “We used to play on the stony beach,” he says, and getting to the beach was part of the fun. He explains that a jagged edge of land along the lakefront had a drop-off about the height of his cottage. It was caused by erosion. To get to the beach below, they climbed down an extension ladder that was propped against the bank. From the beach they could watch the Bank Swallows that burrowed into the upper part of the sandy bank.



Roy Lessels in the driver's seat of his Model A Ford.

During his high school years, Roy Lessels was hired by St. Jude's Anglican Church to work at the cemetery, conveniently located next to Holyrood Estate. He worked there for two summers. "My jobs were cutting grass, trimming, grave digging and cutting tree roots. All of these chores were done using hand tools." It was laborious work, but the money he made would serve to achieve his goal: "I got my driver's license in 1946," says Lessels. Then he purchased a 1931 Model A Ford. "That was my first car—I bought it from Dad." When car parts were needed, there was one place he could rely on: Burke's Auto Wrecking.

Lessels says that during a difficult period for the Lefebvres, his father worked without pay.

"Now mind you, we were living in the gardener's cottage . . . there was no rent." The estate had a large vegetable garden and a Spy apple orchard. He recalls that his mother did a fair amount of canning during that time. Sometime later, he says, Mr. Lefebvre took him and his brother to Oakville Hardware to pick out bikes. "I guess that was a thank you to Dad."

When Holyrood was sold in 1945, says Roy Lessels, his father worked for the new owner and the Lessels family continued to live at the cottage. Still, he remembers that it had been a difficult period for his mother when it came time for Mrs. Lefebvre to leave. "They were very close—mind you, they were still employer and employee." Just before the Lefebvre family moved, Mrs. Lefebvre gave his mother a painting made from an etched copper plate that had hung on the wall of Holyrood house. It's a painting that Roy Lessels still cherishes today.

Lessels considers his family fortunate to have lived the life they had at Holyrood, and credits one employer above the others: "The Lefebvres were very good to our family—very good."

Roy Lessels, interview by Patricia Stephenson, September 3, 2019.

Some quotations taken from notes in his photo albums. Permission granted to publish photos.



Oakville Historical
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since 1953

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Do You Have a Story to Tell?

If you would like to share your Oakville story, we'd love to hear from you.

To arrange an interview, please email information@oakvillehistory.org. Please indicate "Story to Tell" in the subject line. Interviews may be conducted at the OHS office or if you prefer, we can come to you.

A note from the BHS President

This has been quite a good year for the Bronte Historical Society with heavy weekend foot traffic through the summer and Fall and good utilization of the historic facility for various public and private functions and events. As I sit here watching the first large snowflakes of the season fall on the roof of Sovereign House, the scene is already very festive with the House beautifully decorated for our forthcoming Christmas Arts and Crafts sale, which will be over by the time you read this note, regrettably.

Bronte Harbour took quite a beating this year from the spring storms and flooding. The Town of Oakville did what it could in the way of remediation after the damage occurred, but global warming trends suggest this will be everyday life and we need to become accustomed to it. The village of Bronte is undergoing many changes now with construction of the massive new condo building adjacent to the old Bronte Mall site now well underway while the preservation of our local heritage becomes more important.

The recent announcement by Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing Steve Clark that the amalgamation of Oakville, Burlington, Milton and Halton Hills will not proceed was very welcome but still a warning that our local heritage is always under threat. Instead, the Province committed it will provide municipalities with the resources to support local decision making with funding that will help Halton lower costs and improve services for residents over the long term to be provided by Ontario. It is now even more important that we all make extra efforts to get more people involved in our efforts to support local decision making with funding that will help Halton lower costs and improve services for residents over the long term to be provided by Ontario. It is now even more important that we all make extra efforts to get

more people involved in our efforts to support local heritage projects.

On this theme, the Town of Oakville supports the long running Bronte Harbour and Bluffs Cultural Heritage Landscape Strategy Implementation Project, about which more information is expected to be released shortly at a public meeting. Go to: <https://www.oakville.ca/business/cultural-heritage-landscape-strategy.html> to learn more about this initiative.

Of course, the biggest contribution members of the Bronte Historical Society can make to stimulate more interest in our local history is to sign up more members for the Society and encourage others to participate. My personal objective for 2020 is to ask every member to sign up at least one new member to broaden the pool of volunteers from which to enjoy increased local support. With more participation from those who live in this beautiful corner of Oakville we can expect our voices to be heard as planning moves forward.

I look forward to discussing these and other subjects with our board at our December meeting. Tom Appleton, BHS President

The logo for Turner Chapel Antiques, featuring the letters 'TCA' in a stylized, cursive font.

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Remembering Donalda Fordham

Donalda, a long time/well known resident of Bronte, passed away peacefully in Oakville Hospital on Sept. 7th, 2019. Some of our members attended her Memorial/Celebration ... a remarkable and inspiring story of career/personal experience and ongoing connection with extended family and her Community.

She trained at Lakeshore Teacher's College and is remembered by others in her profession, as their assigned practice teacher. Many of her former students at Centriller and E.A. Orr recall time spent with her in the library.

Donalda was an avid reader, theatre patron and long distance traveller. I recall her landmark birthday party/reception, which was held at Sovereign House ... standing room only. Mark Zelinski, Canadian photographer and former student, was a special guest.

She participated on our Board as Secretary and then as Treasurer, followed by taking on the role of Archivist ... ensuring the Sovereign House collection was carefully documented. She was very helpful in locating material, in response to enquiries, requests for supportive content for our Newsletter and for the Bronte BIA "Lake Walk" events. As well, she assisted Oakville Public Library to create an updated digital Bronte photo essay.

Donalda was "low key" in her observations/comments, but possessed and shared a wealth of information about the Bronte area. She was a good listener and was instructive in sorting out what was "History" and what was "Anecdote". Her approach was useful when we had a meeting with a local Girl Guide troop. These young ladies were working on the badge "Legends, Folklore and Myths".

In Feb. 2013, she was recognized by the Ontario Heritage Trust, receiving a Lifetime Achievement

award. For over 20 years she volunteered her talents to Halton Region Museum, the Merrick Thomas House (she was an active member of the local Craft Guild) and the Bronte Historical Society. While serving at the Museum, she gained hands-on experience cataloguing, on computer, their archival and artifact collection.

Donalda was a natural story teller. During the spring of 2014, we worked with the staff of Bronte Creek Provincial Park preparing a presentation about the early history of the waterway. We attended the evening event at the amphitheatre in the park campground. In the submission to our newsletter, she wrote:

"With our warm coats, a blanket, an umbrella and unfortunately minus our bug juice, we followed the dark winding road and the grassy path to the theatre and parked ourselves on the bleachers. In spite of modern media, a train whistle or two and several jets overhead, one could be transported back in time to the early days of Bronte Creek. Although most of the audience was quite young, I trust they became a little more aware of and appreciative of the surroundings in which they were camping."

Each year, an autumn clematis vine grows along the railing at the west entrance to the House ... a souvenir from our colleague. I appreciate my association with Donalda during my time as Historian at Bronte Historical Society.

Betty Stong, BHS Member



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Proposal in the Park

Darian proposed to me on Friday, 4th August, 2017. He organized a dinner out together a week in advance. It was very hot and humid and raining on-and-off all day. When I arrived home after work, he asked if I still wanted to go out for dinner because at this point it was pouring rain. I said yes, I was looking forward to our date night, lets put on our rain boots, grab our umbrella and go downtown.

He parked close to the Merrick Thomas House and wanted to go for a walk through the park before dinner. It started pouring, so we ran to shelter ourselves under the Thomas House roof and I immediately sat down on the front steps. He was looking at me and then he began to tell me he had something for me. The way he said it, I immediately started to tear up—there was something magical in the air. Also, because of the rain, we were the only ones around, we had the whole park to ourselves. He reached in to his favourite cargo bag that he had with him (which I thought was odd), and handed me a small red Salvatore Ferragamo bag. I opened the bag (thinking it was something from Ferragamo), removed the white tissue paper and there was a hand-carved wooden egg, locked shut, sitting on a piece of stone. I knew right away he had made this. I asked him, "What is this, there is a lock on it?" He told me I have the key. I asked where. He said, "Where do you normally keep your keys?" I reached into my purse and I saw he had placed the key on my key chain without me noticing. So the key was with me, I had been carrying it around the whole time. I opened the egg, smiling/laughing/crying all at once, and inside was my ring, which he had made for me. A diamond was bracketed by my two birthstones—sapphire and peridot (as I am on the cusp).

He had hand-carved the wooden egg from a piece of ironwood, found in a special place where he used to spend time as child—coincidentally very close to where I grew up in Collingwood. It was mounted on a piece of sandstone, found by him when he was child, at Coronation Park. His father is the late Oakville artist/sculptor, Josef Petriska, and he used his father's tools (and skills) to make the box. Darian grew up in a heritage house on Lakeshore Road West, and thought this area of Oakville would be a special, memorable spot to always cherish.

Dorina Lendvai



The special ring and box presented to Dorina Lendvai.
Photo: D. Lendvai

Stories Behind the Walls



Found boots. Photo: Tom Murison

We are currently restoring the columns and piers at the front porch of an Oakville house south of Lakeshore Road. The piers were in the process of collapse, and the severe infestation by carpenter ants had begun. Right below the threshold we found a pair of boots concealed in the dirt. They appear to have been placed there when the porch was constructed with the house in 1910. This conforms with the ancient superstition that a hidden shoe could ward off evil from entering a building. However, usually shoes are found singly and over door heads or behind chimneys, not outside the entry.

They were heavily worn when hidden, and upright, side-by-side. There are five eyelets lower down and three eye-hooks higher on the ankle. One boot has a braided lace, the other a cut leather lace, probably original to the boot. Staining may be from the soil or from the mixing of mortar. In this case the shoes may have belonged to the mason who constructed the piers and likely the house as well, since the same brick was used throughout.

Shoes were considered a suitable proxy for the human being they represented because they were worn, and exemplified the character of the person, perhaps as a way to mislead and thwart a malevolent spirit seeking access to the building.

This is preemptive or "white" magic. While I have found many examples of positive concealments, I have also found one example of a memorial, and one example of a cursed concealment or "black" magic, which contained razor blades and broken glass in a manner that would cut a hand entering the cavity in the wall. It also contained a twist of paper with a suspicious white powder, and a torn-up mortgage, that may relate to the hidden infant's dress under the stairs, and to the repeated purchase and bankruptcy of the young couple who built the house extension in 1859, then lost it to the bank in two more unsuccessful attempts to repurchase the property years later. This house in Milton seemed to carry a legacy of bad luck more than a century later, as evidenced by conversations with former residents who explained the feelings and experiences they had while in the same residence.

Houses have stories and talk to us.

Tom Murison, Oakville-based restoration consultant and dendrochronologist,



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Ghost Walks



Mrs. Silverthorne, holding her ailing niece, begs wandering ghosts for help. Photo: Steve Bysouth

A Big Thank You to the Ghosts this year for another successful two weeks and except for the last night of rain, thanks for the fine weather encountered throughout. And many thanks to those of you who acted as caterers, cashiers or actually 'haunted' neighbouring homes. Of course, thanks to our high school students who earned volunteer hours as roaming ghosts and caterers.

If any of our readers would like to try out as a Ghost Leader next year, please contact Wendy Belcher (wendypan@usa.net). We were unable to accommodate some guests due to the lack of Ghost Leaders this year, so we would love to hear from any new members, friends of members—with or without acting skills!—we have a script for you. You get to choose a character from Oakville's past. Your commitment can be as much as you wish for the (usually) 13 nights of the walks. There are three walks per night with that number doubling for some nights. This is a fun opportunity to be someone else from Oakville's past and to enlighten those who join us on these walks. Wendy Belcher and Mary Davidson

Membership

We are pleased to welcome the following new members since last newsletter:

Susan and Paul Ambrose, Mr. Andrew Cockwell, Mr. George Gilrane, Ms. Hurley, Ms. Nancy McGuigan, Mr. Edu Metz and Dr. Brian Wilk.

Please note that your membership renewal is now due. You may renew in one of two ways: online, by accessing our website, then going to the Membership section and following the instructions, or by mailing the enclosed membership form together with your cheque. Andrea Stewart and Susan Bowen



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The *way* things were...



Do you know?

What this building is?

Where it was located?

What is at the location now?

Look for the answers in our next issue!



From June 2019 The *way* things were...

This concrete structure supported a rail bridge over Fourteen Mile Creek at Rebecca St., east of T.A. Blakelock High School. The Hamilton Radial Electric Railway ran from Hamilton to Oakville 1906-1924 with plans to extend to Toronto, but the Canadian National Railway was located a mile north and with the growing popularity of motorcars, this plan and the Radial Railway itself, died.

Archive Hours:

Tuesday & Thursday 1:00 to 4:30 pm

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

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