

Historically Speaking

The Newsletter of the Cobourg and District
Historical Society

October 2017 — Issue 291

Sir John A. Macdonald Visits Cobourg

Brian and Renée Porter *aka* Sir John A. Macdonald and Lady Agnes Macdonald will be our presenters for our Tuesday October 24 meeting.

We are thrilled to be able to host our first prime minister and his wife during this sesquicentennial celebration year at the Cobourg Historical Society. Sir John will commence his presentation by enacting one of his more famous speeches, perhaps with some reference to our own James Cockburn. Brian Porter will follow with some details about our famous founding father. Lady Agnes Macdonald will read from her diary, perhaps sharing some intimate details of life in Ottawa 150 years ago.

Brian Porter is a retired teacher and along with his wife Renée, a retired nurse, have been doing historical re-enacting of the Macdonalds for 16 years. They have both been Brockville Museum volunteers for over 20 years. Brian is a founding member of the Brockville Infantry Company – 1862 militia re-enactors. He was awarded the Queen's Diamond Jubilee Medal in 2012.



Join us on Tuesday, October 24, in Victoria Hall's Citizens' Forum for a unique opportunity to learn more about two famous Canadians. Doors open at 7:00 PM and the meeting begins at 7:30 PM. Coffee and cookies will be available before the meeting. Admission, including refreshments, is free for members and \$5 for non-members. Annual membership is \$25 for individuals and \$30 for a family. All are welcome so bring a friend!

Our Previous Meeting

Northumberland on the Nile

Ancient Egypt has long captivated the hearts and minds of enterprising and adventurous locals since before Confederation. Methodist Minister Lachlan Taylor, a Cobourg native, was one of a group of pioneering Canadians who made the journey to Egypt in the late 1850s, blazing a new trail of early travel and antiquity buying. He brought home Canada's most well-loved mummy, Antjau, which is now a highlight of the Royal Ontario Museum's Egyptian collection. Then, in the early 1900s, Port Hope resident Dr. Charles Currelly made exceptional archaeological discoveries in Middle and Upper Egypt including unearthing a New Kingdom pyramid. With the help of University of Toronto backers Currelly brought home a treasure trove of antiquities for the 1914 opening of his new Royal Ontario Museum.



Our speaker, Laura Ranieri, is an Egyptologist, writer and the founder of Ancient Egypt Alive who is based in Port Hope. She has written and presented extensively on ancient Egypt at museums and libraries across Canada and in the US. She has also, created and led tours to Egypt. In addition, she has excavated in Bulgaria at a classical Greek site and in Egypt at Amarna and South Asasif. In her lively talk, Laura recounted fascinating tales of Northumberland resident's adventures on the Nile.

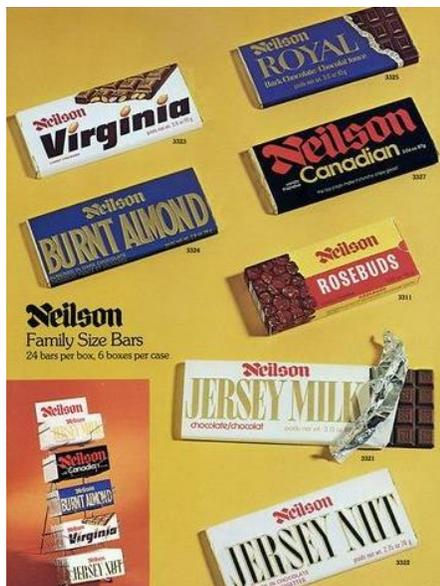
Laura provided two door prizes which were won by Art King and Carla Jones (pictured to the left).

Canada 150: Celebrating Our History

Neilson: A Canadian Success Story

Judith Goulin

Remember some of the chocolate bars of your childhood, the Neilson Jersey Milk that only cost a nickel and especially the ten cent Neilson Burnt Almond? How Neilson's became an iconic Canadian company is an interesting story. Try to picture Toronto in 1893. Toronto was



a small, bustling city with both horse-drawn and electric streetcars, lots of other vehicles pulled by horses and many people on the streets. Queen's Park and the Flatiron Building were popular landmarks and the seven-storey Beard Building, Toronto's first skyscraper, dominated the landscape. This was the year that William Neilson bought seven Jersey cows and three used ice cream churns that had to be cranked by hand. New ice cream churns were advertised in the Eaton's catalogue for \$3.00.

Using the milk from his cows, he made ice cream to sell to local merchants and the Neilson Dairy was established. In time William employed 25 people. Ice cream was a lucrative business in summer but sales slowed in winter. In order to avoid laying off some of his staff, the entrepreneurial Neilson found another use for milk – chocolate! Making good chocolate is not a simple process, as Deborah Cadbury relates in her book *Chocolate Wars: the 150-Year Old Rivalry Between the World's Greatest Chocolate Makers* but Neilson made good chocolate that sold well.

Clearly, William Neilson was an astute businessman, but then there was his son, Morden, who joined Dad's company as a milker and churner. That had to be the bottom rung of the ladder. After Morden went to business college, he became more active in running the company, taking Neilson Dairy to new heights after his father's death in 1915. In fact, Neilson became one of the largest ice-cream producers in the British Empire and the biggest chocolate-maker in Canada. I guess old Dad, William, knew what he was doing when he started his son out with some of the lowliest tasks in the company.

Back in the Twenties, Neilson Dairy was doing so well that Morden purchased 60 acres in Lake of Bays Muskoka, near Dorset, where he had a two storey cottage built. He designed

many innovative features that demonstrate just how clever he was. He had a built-in work desk that ultimately became an entire office room, bathrooms with two entrances with their own wiring system that enabled both doors to be locked, then unlocked simultaneously. He designed a boat lift powered by gears and a hand crank that enabled him to single-handedly lift his boat out of the water. The cottage lacked two important essentials: electricity and a telephone.

Now Morden, as you see, was a wise man. He wanted to live at his cottage all summer but of course he had to still be on top of what was going on at his plant in Toronto. He needed a telephone and nearby Bigwin Inn was the only place in Lake of Bays that had one! In its heyday, Bigwin was frequented by the rich and famous, perhaps because it was the largest and most elegant resort around. Every Friday morning Morden drove his boat to Bigwin Island and by prior arrangement, called his company in Toronto from Bigwin Inn's phone. His employees stood in line waiting their turn to speak to him regarding company matters. This was before telephones were common and calling long distance was very expensive; also long before cell phones, conference calling, computers, fax and email. Imagine that Morden found a way to "work from home" almost a century ago, when it is only in recent years that we have found a way to work at home linked by computer to our offices.



By now, the Neilson company has been sold several times, but the Neilson brand name has wisely been retained. Today many Neilson dairy products are still featured on grocery

shelves. Morden died in 1947, yet his 1920s cottage still stands. Today, fourth and fifth generations of Neilsons own cottages in Muskoka, but the ancestral one built by Morden was sold by Morden's descendants in 1997. Why couldn't my grandfather have owned a cottage in Muskoka?

Sources:

Muskoka Magazine Sept. 2014

Various Internet sources

Of Cranberries and Other Muskoka Things

Judith Goulin

You may regard Muskoka today as an enclave of wealthy cottage owners, but it is much more. Little communities like Bala are charming places to visit. Before this special year in Canada comes to an end, we will have once again celebrated two festive occasions: Thanksgiving and Christmas. What is more evocative (besides turkey) of these high holidays than cranberries? You may think that cranberries only grow in the US, because the fresh and canned cranberries we buy almost always sport an Ocean Spray label. Cranberries do grow in Ontario, specifically in the Muskoka area around Bala, as well as in Quebec.



Today Bala is synonymous with cranberries. In the Fifties when a young Orville Johnston saw the potential of cranberries, he boldly purchased land in Bala and pioneered an industry by cultivating bogs already replete with wild cranberries. At the time, this was Ontario's only cranberry farm. Now in the second and third generation of Johnstons, the greatly expanded operation includes a winery, tours of the cranberry bog and a very successful annual cranberry festival held on their property.

Cranberries grow on long running vines in sandy bogs and marshes, but not underwater, as is commonly believed. This misconception is easy to understand, because the bogs are flooded at harvest time and we often see photos of seas of bright red berries. Harvesters

loosen the berries from the vines by agitating the water. Cranberries have an air pocket that allows them to float and makes them easy to gather.

As you travel Highway 400 north of Barrie, you may notice a large sign advertising The Iroquois Cranberry Growers, another viable Muskoka operation since 1969. Today, cranberries are much more than an accompaniment for turkey twice a year. Since the discovery that they contain many healthy nutrients and antioxidants, they are used in many food products. Even so, this has spelled doom for the Iroquois operation. In a press release earlier this year the Chief announced that:

“High cranberry prices encouraged more production across North America until supply outstripped demand. A decades long worldwide surplus of cranberries and the resulting collapse in cranberry prices has made continuing operations at Iroquois Cranberry Growers untenable. It is with regret that Chief and Council of Wahta Mohawks announces effective immediately, Iroquois Cranberry Growers will cease operations.”

Eat some cranberries today. Make cranberry sauce for Christmas. Go to the Bala Cranberry festival the weekend after Thanksgiving next year. Be a part of our history.

Sources:

Pamphlet: *Bala Cranberry Festival*

www.balacranberryfestival.on.ca/

Membership Matters

Executive Positions

Unfortunately, personal obligations in other areas of their lives have led several members of the CDHS executive to make the difficult decision to resign from the board. If you have some free time and would like to assist our society please consider applying for the position of Treasurer, Membership Coordinator, or Programme Chairperson. Contact any member of the executive to discuss these opportunities. Executive contact information is on the last page of this newsletter.

Announcements

YMCA Information Wanted

A committee at the Cobourg YMCA is working to chronicle YMCA Northumberland's

history. If you can provide any information on the YMCA in Cobourg for years prior to 1948 Tracey Dafoe would appreciate hearing from you. You can contact Tracey at tdafoe@ymcanorthumberland.com

Hamilton Township Tour

Celebrate our architectural heritage with a bus ride through the Hamilton Township countryside with stops at four beautiful rural houses that you can tour inside and out. The tour is on October 28, 2017, 9:30am. to 3:30pm. There will also be a special presentation on local architectural history. The tour starts and ends at the Cold Springs Community Centre, 3844 Burnham St. Tickets are \$40 including bus travel and a sandwich and salad luncheon. Tickets are available at the Hamilton Township municipal office (905-342-2810). For more information contact Les Houston (905-342-3794).

Note that although space on the bus is limited to 38, another 20 tickets will be sold to those who would like to follow in their own cars.

Letters to the Editor

Good morning,

My name is Laura Madokoro and I am an Assistant Professor in the Department of History and Classical Studies at McGill University.

I am currently undertaking new research on the history of sanctuary in Canada from the 1800s to the present. I am looking at both religious and secular acts of sanctuary, meaning the tradition of protection offered by Judeo-Christian churches and other religious institutions as well as protection offered by ethnic and local communities in the face of state efforts to arrest, prosecute or deport individuals for various reasons.

To date, my research team has uncovered dozens of sanctuary by exploring digitized historical newspapers from across the country available on line. However, I believe the bulk of the relevant material related to sanctuary rests in the local communities where sanctuary offers once took place.

I am writing to you in the hopes that you might assist me with this research by disseminating my email to members of your association. I am most interested in learning about any sanctuary offers that might be captured in archival / museum / library holdings and would appreciate guidance on searching these holdings. I also suspect that many stories of sanctuary are not captured in archival repositories but rather are housed in the memories of people who live and work in the communities where sanctuary once took place. I would therefore appreciate any assistance in terms of tracking down local histories / local lore.

I would be happy to answer any questions or concerns you might have. I can be reached at laura.madokoro@mcgill.ca.

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