



The Historical Society of St. Catharines

P.O. Box 25017, 221 Glendale Avenue, Pen Centre,
St. Catharines, Ontario L2T 4C4

Our mission and goal: to increase the knowledge and appreciation of the history of St. Catharines and area. The Society was founded in 1927.
Our Society is affiliated with the Ontario Historical Society.

Our website is: <http://stcatharineshistory.wordpress.com>

January/March Newsletter

Lecture Program – March 23, 2017 to June 22, 2017

Program Subject to Change

Thursday, March 23, 2017 - Isabel Bachmann will give an illustrated talk entitled “**Medical Services on the Welland Ship Canal, 1913-1932,**” describing measures taken to care for the workers injured while doing the dangerous work required to complete that project – field hospitals, first aid stations, doctors on call, ambulances, and the like, from one end of the Canal to the other.

Thursday, April 27, 2017 - Debra Antoncic, Director/Curator of the RiverBrink Art Museum in Queenston, will give an illustrated talk about “**Art and Poetry on the Welland Canal,**” reviewing the art and poetry inspired by the four Welland Canals, 1829 to date – this a preview for a special exhibit on that subject that will open at RiverBrink in late September of this year.

Thursday, May 25, 2017 - Mike Saunders, formerly on the staff of radio station CKTB, will offer an illustrated history of the station, a significant part of the life of this city since it began broadcasting in 1930.

Thursday, June 22, 2017 - Retired Brock University History Professor Wes Turner will discuss the background to **Confederation** as we celebrate this year the 150th anniversary of that turning point in the history of this country.

SOCIETY NEWS

The Society gratefully acknowledges the support of the Ontario Ministry of Tourism and Culture.

Society Notes

Membership Dues Reminder: Your Society membership needed to be renewed on September 1, 2016. Our membership form for the 2016-2017 is enclosed on the last page of this newsletter. If you wish to receive a membership card, notify John Calvert at: jcalvert57@hotmail.com. We are also now sending the

Newsletter to members by e-mail, so we ask that you provide your e-mail address on the membership form.

SHOW AND TELL MEETING (JANUARY 26, 2017)

The following is a summary of the annual “Show and Tell” held by the Historical Society of St. Catharines on January 26, 2017:

1. Tom presented a wine bottle with paper label and an advertisement from the Thorold Post showing a similar bottle. The assertion on the advertising was that the port wine contained within was a tonic for invalids.
2. Mary Sirotnik, a woman of Slovak heritage, brought in a simple little brown jug that her mother had received from her mother, who, in turn, received it from her mother. The presenter received it after the elder woman and husband left Czechoslovakia to join their children in Canada in about 1948, after the Communists took power in Czechoslovakia.
3. Nina Stahlschmidt showed crocheted flour bags, from a local source that went over to Belgium as a relief measure when Belgium was occupied by the Germans during World War I, and came back crocheted in vibrant colours by the thankful Belgians.
4. Patrick Fuller presented a ship in a bottle produced by a German POW. The POW camp was minimum security as the men were merchant marine sailors and thus non combatants. The camp was in the Wainfleet Marsh. The men would work on local farms or cut peat.
5. Gail Benjafield showed an interesting aerial photo of Toronto harbor ca 1954 and talked about an aerial photography firm of Harry Oakman that made such aerial photos all over Ontario.
6. Ron Calvert brought in 2 axes and described the physics of how the shape of the axes determined their functions. One of the axes allowed smoothing of a entire timber grooves with minimal tool marks.
7. Dan Sundy showed a couple of 8 INCH floppy disks of the kind used at a Vineland laboratory where his wife worked in the 1970s -- to show how the technology has changed over the years. That one BIG disk probably held about a megabyte.
8. Suzie Hastings produced 2 Bibles which contained the genealogy of her Irish antecedents since 1873. The presenters assembled at the front of the room, with their artifacts and answered questions from individuals.

Location of Monthly Meetings for Historical Society of St. Catharines

The monthly meetings for the Historical Society of St. Catharines are typically held at the St. Catharines Museum. We are looking for input from the members on the venue of our monthly meetings. In particular, we would like to know if our members are generally satisfied with the current venue or if there is any desire to look into other venues. The Board of Directors has discussed the issue of having monthly meetings at the St. Catharines Public Library. Your feedback is appreciated. Please contact Dan Sundy at drsundy@vaxxine.com.

Motion to be Decided on by Members at the April 27, 2017 Annual General Meeting

The Board of Directors has agreed to the following amendment to the By-laws/Constitution, which will be voted on by the members of the Historical Society of St. Catharines at the Annual General Meeting on April 27, 2017.

The Board of Directors has a concern that the determination of a quorum in a general meeting of all of the members of the Society is dependent on a precise knowledge of a changing membership roster. Therefore, the Board of Directors would like to change the quorum to a straight-forward number.

The next sentence (Section 7.4 of the By-laws/Constitution) is how the By-laws/Constitution reads now with respect to establishing a quorum at General Meetings comprised of all of the membership. (As opposed to executive meetings):

“7.4 A quorum for any of the above meetings shall be 20% of members in good standing.

It is proposed to change the wording to:

“7.4 A quorum for any of the above meetings shall be 20 members in good standing.”

If you have any questions or comments about this resolution or any other matters pertaining to the upcoming Annual General Meeting, please contact the Newsletter Editor at dave.willer@hotmail.com. If you are interested in joining the Board of Directors, or know of anyone who may be interested, please let us know.

Newsletter Notes

Catharine Welland Merritt and Oak Hill

Catharine Welland Merritt was born on November 28, 1866, just prior to our Confederation year. Also known as “Cassie”, she was the older daughter in an eight-child family. Her father was the eccentric Jedediah Prendergast Merritt, oldest living son of William Hamilton Merritt. Her mother was Emily Alexandrina Prescott Merritt.

Their family home was “Oak Hill”, the sizeable mansion located at the corner of St. Paul St. West and Yates St. in St. Catharines. The original house on that property was built in 1827-29 for William Hamilton Merritt and his family. The property was within sight of Merritt’s mills and other businesses along the Twelve Mile Creek. It was extensive, stretching to Trafalgar St. and east to include what we know now as Memorial Park, where the Cenotaph stands. Fruit orchards covered the property, and its gardens reached down the hill towards the creek. In 1858 the house burned down, possibly by arson, but it was rebuilt in 1859-60. The architect of this Italianate-style home was William Thomas of Toronto, who also designed the second Brock’s Monument. A fine brick coach house stood, and still stands, behind the house, and the original walls of the gardens still line Yates St.

Only two years later, in 1862, William Hamilton Merritt and his wife both died. Jedediah and his family took over Oak Hill and remained there until Jedediah’s death in 1900. So young Cassie would have known the pleasure of growing up in these rather idyllic surroundings. After Jedediah died in 1900, Catharine became owner of Oak Hill. When construction of the first Burgoyne Bridge began in 1914, St. Paul St. West was realigned and brought closer to the house. Shortly thereafter Catharine allowed the home to become a convalescent hospital for wounded soldiers during World War One.

Just as war was breaking out, Catharine and three other local women were touring in Germany. The story was that they had a narrow escape, making their way back to safety through Switzerland and Paris. Arriving in Britain, Catharine was summoned to Buckingham Palace where Queen Mary commissioned her to form branches of Queen Mary’s Needlework Guild. The name sounds frivolous but in fact these groups would get together to knit or sew clothing for Canadian soldiers and their families and to provide aid for them in other ways as well. In 1914-15, Catharine crossed Canada at her own expense, organizing branches of the guild. She contributed the material for over a thousand items of clothing and two thousand guild badges.

Catharine was also active in the Imperial Order Daughters of the Empire and the United Empire Loyalists. In April of 1923 she received an invitation to attend the wedding of the Duke of York (later King George VI) and Lady Elizabeth Bowes-Lyon at

Westminster Abbey. Catharine was apparently one of the few Canadians to be invited to this royal event, and it would seem that her efforts during the Great War were being acknowledged. And on November 20, 1924, she unveiled a cairn at Allanburg for the Centennial of the Welland Canal. It was placed at the spot where George Keefer, her grandfather William Hamilton Merritt, and the other directors of the Welland Canal Company turned the first sod for the canal in 1824.

In 1926 Catharine Welland Merritt sent a letter to the Geographical Board of Canada correcting many 'errors' in the Board's 17th report. Her main argument was that St. Catharines, Lincoln County, was in fact named after her grandmother, Catharine Rodman Prendergast Merritt, wife of William Hamilton Merritt, when he changed the name from Shipman's Corners to St. Catharines in 1816 (he could do that, apparently, as he established the local post office there). Catharine went on to state that the old Church of St. Catharines was named after Catharine Butler, wife of Col. Butler of the Butler's Rangers, and not Catharine Hamilton, wife of Robert Hamilton. This letter disputed many commonly held facts about our local history and she criticized some local historians of the time.

In March of 1927, in St. George's Church, St. Catharines, Catharine married Sir Henry Pellatt, of Casa Loma fame. By that time Sir Henry had unfortunately had a downturn in his finances, had been forced to leave Casa Loma in 1923, and lost his first wife, Mary Dodgson, in 1924.

Sadly, Catharine Welland Merritt died only a couple of years later, after an illness of six months, on December 19, 1929 at their Crescent Rd. home in Toronto. She is buried in Victoria Lawn Cemetery. She was sixty-two years old.

Meanwhile, what had become of Oak Hill? After World War One, members of the Merritt family were once again in possession of their home. In 1923 they donated the surrounding land to the City of St. Catharines, and in 1928 the house was sold to Goodwin Bernard, a fruit farmer. During the Depression the house again changed hands several times. In 1933-34 it became the Oban Inn; in 1935-36 it was the Old Homestead Inn. And in 1937-38: the Rosdol Inn. Then in 1938 Edward T. Sandell, a former owner of Taylor & Bate Brewing Co., purchased the building and moved his radio broadcasting business into it. The company was then known as Silver Spire Broadcasting. After Sandell's death, Major H. B. Burgoyne purchased the company in 1944 and it soon became known as radio station CKTB (the TB standing for Taylor Bate). Still a broadcasting centre to this day, the old Oak Hill mansion has been designated a heritage site.

There are a number of stories about the tunnels that ran from the house to the coach house behind and then down to Twelve Mile Creek. It has been said that rebels from the Mackenzie Rebellion of 1837-38 might have been imprisoned there. Another more

common theory is that the tunnels could have been used as hiding places for escaped slaves during the Underground Railroad days of the 1840s and 50s, William Hamilton Merritt being an active sympathizer. And lastly, the tunnels were possibly used by bootleggers during Prohibition. In any case, these tunnels were sealed off in 1967.

As we now observe the construction of our new second Burgoyne Bridge, Oak Hill and the Merritt family remain in our line of vision at the centre of St. Catharines' history. When the new bridge is finished, the plan is for the parks and gardens to be restored, and so the circle will in some ways be complete.

Elizabeth Finnie, March 2017



This is a postcard of the Oak Hill residence when it was used as a Military Convalescent Home during the First World War. This picture is courtesy of the Niagara Falls (Ontario) Public Library.



Catharine Welland Merritt (ca. 1910). This photograph is courtesy of the St. Catharines Public Library.

The Historical Society of St. Catharines

Membership Renewal

For membership year **September 1, 2016 through August 31, 2017**

Membership Dues: **Individual \$10.00; Family \$15.00**

Make cheques payable to: The Historical Society of St. Catharines

Mail to: The Historical Society of St. Catharines
P.O. Box 25017, 221 Glendale Avenue, Pen Centre
St. Catharines, Ontario, L2T 4C4

Your membership information will not be shared with any other group or business.

Note: As this is a general mailing, if you have already renewed your membership, please disregard this notice.

For your record: Renewed on: _____, 2016 - Cheque in the amount of: \$_____

Remove the form below and return with your remittance

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Membership Renewal

For membership year **September 1, 2016 thorough August 31, 2017**

I wish to renew my/our membership: **Individual:** _____ - **Family:** _____

Name(s): _____

Mailing Address: _____

postal code/zip code: _____

My/Our telephone number: _____

I/we would like to receive Society meeting reminders and notices by e-mail: _____

I/we would like to receive Society Newsletter by print: _____

My/Our e-mail <_____>

Comment: _____