

Guelph Historical Society

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Newsletter - February 2004

Lead and Society: The Nature of a Changing Relationship



At our February 3rd meeting we were enlightened and entertained by University of Guelph Zoology Professor, Dr. Vernon Thomas. Dr. Thomas, a self-admitted "bad scientist" because he involves himself with politics gave an historical overview of society's use of lead. For over 3,000 years society has used lead for domestic and industrial uses but

has become disenchanted with it due to its toxicity. Lead was used because all continents have it, it melts at a low temperature, it is malleable and easily assumes the shape of molds, it can mix well with other metals and it doesn't rust. Ancient Romans used it for many purposes and Dr. Thomas stated that "Roman lead is still as good today as it was when it was poured". Lead was also used in the construction of some of the great Gothic organs in churches in Germany and the Netherlands. The phenomenal acoustics of these organs is directly attributed to the pure lead pipes. Lead used for shot was revolutionized in 1767 by Englishman William Watt. He invented the process of making shot by pouring molten lead through colanders down the open shaft of a high tower. As the lead spun and cooled in the air it became perfectly round in form. With this process it became easier to make smaller shot ideal for bird hunting. Watt's process made him a wealthy man, and shot towers sprung up all over Europe

and the USA. Though hundreds of these towers were built from the early 1800s to the early 1900s, very few remain and their locations are highly contaminated. Locally, Ancaster, Ontario still has a shot tower site.

According to Dr. Thomas, the industrial era saw expanded uses for lead. Lead was used extensively in the paint industry, as well as in the production of crystal, gasoline and batteries. Dr. Vernon added that with the growing use of lead came the growing awareness of its toxicity. Many of the body's systems can be affected by lead with impacts that are "highly detrimental or fatal". Once the problem of toxicity was acknowledged, society took steps to becoming lead free, including the removal of lead from gasoline and the adoption of stricter building codes. Dr. Thomas noted we must exercise caution with older pipes, old painted furniture and to look very carefully at the glazes used on pottery. Also, one should not store their spirits in crystal decanters because the lead can get into the alcohol. Dr. Thomas cited the startling statistic that the most serious disease affecting children today is lead poisoning, particularly evident in older tenement housing where the lead paint has not been removed. Children put the peeling paint in their mouths because it is sweet from the "sugar of lead". This is a serious health risk and US Senator Hillary Clinton has become a strong supporter of the removal of lead paint from housing.

Dr. Thomas believes that though we have taken measures to remove lead from society we have treated the natural environment differently. As a Zoologist he sees the devastation caused by lead poisoning in birds. The discharged shot from hunters and sport shooters gets into marsh lands and once consumed by a duck or swan, 4 shots are enough to kill the waterfowl within 2 weeks. Dr. Thomas estimated that 48% to 50% of all wild swans lost each year are a direct result of lead poisoning. Locally, loons at Guelph Lake have been poisoned by the lead sinkers used in fishing. Loons and ducks swallow stones to aid in the digestion of fish and sadly they also ingest lead from fishing tackle. On average Dr. Thomas estimated that a startling 25% of the loon deaths each year throughout Ontario, Quebec and the New England States are due to lead poisoning. Dr. Thomas spoke of the "human capacity for self deception" in that man externalizes "the consequences of behaviors to another entity or group so that we may continue that behaviour for personal gain". He stated we would not have a problem with lead poisoning in nature if we would apply to the natural world the same principles that we do to humans. Sadly some people have the attitude "better dead than a life without lead". Dr. Thomas noted there are substitutes for fishing tackle that contain lead and advocates that lead should be removed from all shot used. Split jurisdiction between levels of government and competition amongst agencies dealing with the problem are other hindrances in ridding the natural world of lead. Dr. Thomas has worked to draft recommendations and legislation in Canada and abroad but finds resistance based on cost especially in the sporting world. He gave an example based on "beer units"; a sport fisherman could replace all the harmful lead tackle in their gear for the cost of one case of beer. A sobering thought!

Next Meeting:

Tuesday, March 2nd, 2004 @ 7:30 pm

St. Andrew's Church – 161 Norfolk St., Guelph

March Speaker:

Dr. W. Chandler Kirwin will present a talk entitled, *Rural Architecture in Eramosa Township*. Dr. Kirwin received his degrees from Princeton and Stanford Universities, and has a long teaching career in Art History at the University of Guelph. Though specializing in the Italian Renaissance, he is keenly interested in the local history and building traditions of this area. His illustrated talk will explore the history and construction of barns and farmhouses in the former Eramosa Township (now part of modern day Guelph-Eramosa). Admission is free and all are welcomed.

April: Dr. Stephen Thorning, "Illicit Romance in the Age of Victoria".

Ruth and Eber Pollard Scholarship

At our February meeting, Dr. Terry Crowley, Chair of the Department of History at the University of Guelph, made an appeal for monetary donations to the Pollard Scholarship. This scholarship is awarded to a 4th year history student and was initiated by the GHS in 1993 to recognize the contributions made by Ruth and Eber Pollard to the GHS and the community. Donations are eligible for a tax receipt. You can send your donations (made payable to the **University of Guelph**) to: Alumni House – University of Guelph
Guelph, Ontario N1G 2W1

Indicate on the memo line of your *cheque*:

"Donation to the Ruth & Eber Pollard Scholarship"



Bring your Zehrs tapes to our monthly meetings. They can be placed in the collection box on the membership table!

Support the Guelph Historical Society by becoming a member. Visit our website for details:

www.guelphhistorical.society.ca

Looking for an Excursion?

- ❖ **3 Day Mystery Tour**
(June 8 - 10, 2004)
- ❖ **Noah: The Musical**, Lancaster, PA
(June 21 - 24, 2004)
- ❖ **Summer in Chicago**
(August 9 - 13, 2004)
- ❖ **Square Dance in Pigeon Forge**
(October 2 - 8, 2004)
- ❖ **Christmas with The Walter Family**, Sanderson Centre, Brantford
(December 2, 2004)

Contact:
Clare Newson Travel
(519) 823-1118

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Any requests for submissions for the next newsletter must be forwarded to Judi prior to **March 8th** so they can be brought forward for consideration at the next meeting of the GHS Board of Directors.

BUS TRIP TO GODERICH Wednesday, June 2nd, 2004

Cost (includes full lunch):

\$57 members, \$75 non-members



Located on the edge of Lake Huron, Goderich is the sister city of Guelph, founded by John Galt and the Canada Company in 1827. This trip will explore the town's built and social history, and

will look at the importance of salt mining, trade and tourism to the town's growth. Your ticket price covers all fees and includes an exquisite lunch at the Benmiller Inn.

8:00 a.m. **Bus leaves** Stone Road Mall parking lot

9:00 a.m. **Coffee break** and leg stretch in scenic small town, Huron County.

10:30 a.m. **Tour of Goderich**

11:45 a.m. **Lunch at the Benmiller Inn**

1:30 p.m. **Huron County Museum**

3:00 p.m. **Huron County Gaol** (shown above)

4:00 p.m. **Free time** downtown Goderich

7:00 p.m. **Arrive** back in Guelph

To reserve a seat, contact
Elysia DeLaurentis at
(519) 846-8280.

Money can not be refunded after May 1st, 2004

continued from page 1



