

Guelph Historical Society

www.guelphhistoricalsociety.ca

Newsletter - April 2004

Behind the Lace Curtains: Illicit Romance in the Age of Victoria



Dr. Stephen Thorning tackled a most interesting topic at our April meeting. Dr. Thorning described himself as a business and transportation historian but added that he has increasingly spent a lot of time on local history. He has a particular interest in family life or as he called it *"when family life goes wrong"*.

Dr Thorning stated that during the Victorian era, marriage was viewed as providing some economic stability. Women were seen as the anchors of the home and needed to be protected from men who were seen as predatory in nature. He also stated that there was an ambivalent attitude towards brothels. They were seen as a threat to the family but on the other hand they were seen a way to channel men's passions.

During Victorian times (and until recent history) divorce was difficult to achieve. A Canadian divorce was an impossibility for most in Ontario but those people with money could travel south for a New York State divorce. People of lesser financial means simply went their separate ways and began new lives. Dr. Thorning stated that the government did not track marriages as they do now and that registering marriages was not compulsory at this time. He added that sometimes former spouses would resurface at inconvenient times resulting in blackmail attempts. He gave the example of Elora teamster Tom Everett who while living

with his wife and 5 children had his first wife, who he hadn't bother to divorce, resurface. Dr. Thorning stated that police were reluctant to charge Everett but when pressured to do so Everett fled to the USA abandoning both families.

Dr. Thorning does a lot of research using newspapers and court records where he says one can find many *"scandalous things"*. The most common cases were *"seduction"* and *"breach of promise"* cases. In seduction cases the girl usually ranged in age from about 15 to early 20s. These were civil cases brought forward by the girl's father who is viewed as the injured party not the girl involved. In some cases the awards were substantial ranging from \$500 to \$1000. During the 1870s a yearly income was about \$500 per year and \$1000 could buy a small house. Breach of promise cases were less common and the women were usually older than 20 years of age.

Dr. Thorning also discussed Guelph's infamous *"Brick House"* brothel which operated in the open and was run by Carrie Wright. It was located on Woolwich Street which at the time straddled legal jurisdictions. It was only after increasing pressure by the community, which was spurred on by the local newspaper editor, that it was raided on May 27th, 1875. Chief Constable Kelly found 4 young men, respected members of Guelph families, in the parlour with 3 girls drinking beer. Thorning noted that during this period there was no way for young men and women to socialize unsupervised. Mrs. Wright was fined \$50 plus court costs and was able to pay her fines within the hour. The other women charged (including 2 girls who were not even there at the time of the raid) were unable to pay their fines and were sentenced to 30 days in jail. The cases against the 4 men involved were dismissed but not before a warning from the judge telling them to be careful about the company they keep.

Another *"house of infamy"* operated in Guelph much more discretely. It was run by Lena Rosas Von Schulum, better known as *"Dutch Lena"*. Her house was located on Crimea Street which at the time was situated at the edge of the City and within an industrial area. Even after being burned in a humorous but horrific cigar incident while riding in a buggy she continued her work until moving to Toronto in 1878. Thorning has tracked her whereabouts to Winnipeg and later to Buffalo.

Another scandalous case Thorning discussed involved then Crown Attorney Henry Peterson. Peterson sued a doctor friend because of an affair he had with Peterson's wife. Many of Guelph's elite were forced to testify in the legal proceedings and Peterson was eventually awarded \$5,000 (worth about ½ million dollars today) but unfortunately for Peterson that did not stop the affair.

Through these examples and other *"illicit"* tales of romance he discussed, Thorning concluded his talk by saying that these old cases show that even with today's scandals *"there is nothing new under the sun"*.

Next Meeting:

Tuesday, October 5th, 2004 @ 7:30 pm
St. Andrew's Church – 161 Norfolk St., Guelph

October Speaker:

Joyce Pharoah – Topic: Riverslea Mansion, Guelph
Homewood Health Centre – more details to follow in the
September Newsletter. Admission is free and all are
welcomed.

Annual Meeting:

The April 6th meeting was our Annual General Meeting. If
you would like a copy of the Annual Report that was
distributed, please contact - Andrew Thomson, GHS

President.

And The Winner is...



At our April 6th Annual General Meeting the new GHS logo (see below) was unveiled. Logo competition chair Ken Irvine (left) congratulates the design winner Annette Molzahn (right). Congratulations to Annette and thank you to all that submitted designs.

The **Guelph Youth Music Centre** is seeking monetary donations for their *"Where Music Begins Campaign"*. If you would like to donate or would like further information, please contact:

Heather Glenister, Resource Development Coordinator
Guelph Youth Music Centre
75 Cardigan Street
Guelph, Ontario N1H 3Z7
Telephone: 519-837-1119 / e-mail: heather@gymc.ca



Guelph Arts Council Walking Tours Begin Again in April

There are five walking tours, each of which explores a different area of historic Guelph. All of the Sunday tours start at 2 p.m. from different locations. They take about two hours to complete and cost \$3 per person. For tour dates and other information, please contact the Guelph Arts Council office at 147 Wyndham Street North, Suite 404, Guelph, or phone (519) 836-3280, or fax (519) 766-9212.



GHS Contact Information

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*Any requests for submissions for the next newsletter must be forwarded to Judi prior to **September 12th** so they can be brought forward for consideration at the next meeting of the GHS Board of Directors.*

Canada's War: The Lost Colour Archives

By Bill Packham, GHS Member

A three-part series to mark the 60th anniversary of D-Day (June 6, 2004) and due to air on CBC TV in June is getting some 16mm colour film input from various sources. I submitted a 10 minute 16mm colour, sound film, titled "Wardens of Power". It was produced for The Hydro Electric Power Commission of Ontario in 1941. It was shown along with other "shorts" before feature films in movie theatres across the province to promote the conservation of Hydro by residents of Ontario so power would be available to produce equipment required to support the War Effort. My Dad was given a copy of the film after the theater showings ceased as a "Thank You" for our family's participation in the production of the film.

I received feedback from the producer of the new CBC program that my copy of "Wardens of Power" is still in very good condition, even though it had not been viewed for over 35 years. It may be the only complete original copy still in existence. Both the Hydro One (formerly Ontario Hydro) copy and the National Archives copy in Ottawa were incomplete – they did not have the final few minutes of the show.

The film was returned to me in early February along with more readily viewable VHS and DVD copies, and a note that said "The archivist at Hydro One is pleased to have a complete copy of the film at last". This just goes to show how valuable, archive-wise, some items in our possession may be.

Be sure to check TV guides in June to find out when this show will be airing. Information about this CBC show can be found on the internet at:

www.cbc.ca/documentaries/canadaswar/index.html