

Oakville Historical  
Society  
since 1953

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# Historical Society News

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[www.oakvillehistory.org](http://www.oakvillehistory.org)



Hazel Chisholm Mathews  
Oakville Historical Society Founder

**Volume 56 Number 2**

**June 2022**



Susan Bowen as Mrs. Thomas using her culinary skills.

# Thomas House

**Open**  
**Victoria Day - Labour Day**  
 1:30 - 4:00 pm

**May & June**  
 Sat, Sun

**July - August**  
 Tue, Wed, Thur,

**Labour Day Weekend**  
 Sat, Sun, Mon

Also open Monday  
 Every Summer Holiday Weekend

The Thomas House is operated by volunteers of the Oakville Historical Society who provide maintenance and open the house to 2,000 - 3,000 visitors a year. Admission is free and donations are gratefully accepted.

If you are interested in becoming a volunteer at the Thomas House or a member of the Society, please contact us.

Cover: Hazel Chisholm Mathews with cat, 1957

# A note from the Society President

by George Chisholm

There are several items of good news for this newsletter and some calls for volunteers. Responses can be sent to our general email address: [information@oakvillehistory.org](mailto:information@oakvillehistory.org)

The Thomas House will be opening for the 2022 season. Mary Davidson has already put out a call for interpreters but tells me that there are some spaces yet to be filled. If you're interested in spending some afternoons in the peace and quiet of the Thomas House in Lakeside Park, then we have a job for you. No experience necessary—we provide training. Fair warning: some days can be busier than others. If you're interested, let one of us know. Also at the Thomas House, window frame repair work is needed so please lend a hand.

The yard sale is a go for this season as well, on Saturday June 25th. If you have appropriate items, please let us know and if you request, we can pick them up. There have already been some donations of antique furniture.

The plumbing issues at our office seems to be somewhat repaired but more work is planned. This means that we should be able to reopen the office soon as well. Stay tuned.

Recently Marianne Hawthorne retired as Chair of our Events Committee and the others on the committee are stepping back a bit but are available to advise and assist. We're looking for new members for this committee and for someone to take on organizing our three major events. It doesn't have to be the same person and lots of assistance is available. In early December is our Annual Christmas Party, usually held at our office. In March we have our Annual General Meeting. Until COVID hit, this included a pot luck dinner and was held at St John's Church. Our big event of the year (although cancelled again in 2022) is the Mayor's Historical Picnic held in Lakeside Park in early June (expected to occur

again in 2023) is The Mayor's Historical Picnic held in Lakeside Park in early June. If you're interested in helping with any or all of these events, please let us know.

I'd like to thank two amazing people: Madison Carmichael our intern who put together the story of adventurous Francis Brown who travelled the world but called Oakville home and Steve Bysouth, who produces our videos. Go to [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com) and search for Oakville Historical Society to view these works.

I'd also like to thank the Town of Oakville for providing us with a Heritage Grant to assist with the replacement of the roof on the Thomas House. Work should start soon.

We recently held our Annual General Meeting and I think we set a new record for brevity. Three directors, Greg Munz, Stan Smurlick and Susan Wells completed their three-year terms and all have agreed to stay on for another term. At the following Board Meeting, the slate of officers of the corporation was confirmed. I continue as President, Susan Wells as Vice President, Mark Verlinden as Treasurer and Marie Descent as Secretary.

We are returning to our pre-2020 activities so I hope you can join us soon at 110 King Street for afternoon tea.



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# Oakville and the Sixteen

## The Story Behind the Book

by Ruth Verlinden

Hazel Chisholm Mathews was born in Oakville, the great-granddaughter of Colonel William Chisholm, founder of the town. She was educated in New York City, and returned to spend each summer in Oakville. She lived permanently in Oakville from 1934, making her home in the old Customs House (now part of Erchless, the Oakville Museum), which she renovated after it had stood vacant for over fifty years.

Hazel discovered that the house was full of maps, documents, diaries and other papers and she was encouraged by her sister, Juliet Chisholm, to write the history book, *Oakville and the Sixteen*, based on this material. Thus began a project that lasted many, many years. On the book jacket, Hazel's daughter, Nancy Hart, writes a fascinating description of her mother at work:

Those who think of historical research as mainly involving the turning over of archives in well-catalogued libraries and museums might be startled to learn of the physical exertion that may be required of a conscientious local historian. Not content with poring over mouldy account books and dusty letters, Mrs. Mathews's researches have sent her knee-deep through creek water, into bramble tangles in the wildwood of creek beds, through dank stone tunnels running under 100-foot hogsbacks, and flat on her stomach in a one-foot space under the floor of her house. Dust mask, hip boots and air force flight-lining have equipped her to forage in the nooks and corners of the territory of her history. She will scale 100-foot banks (which terrify her), drag old oak staves (which are much too heavy for her) out of old flumes, and will

take her chance with bulls, steers and such if by so doing she can get one more fact to fit into her story.

In 1953 Hazel founded the Oakville Historical Society and donated her boxes of original source material to us. Those boxes, stored for decades, are full of newspaper articles, index cards, diary entries from other residents, government documentation and all sorts of papers, which Hazel had found in quite a jumble at the Erchless Estate. Over the years, volunteers indexed these papers into card catalogues, using the technology of the twentieth century. Now new OHS volunteers and student interns are digitizing and cataloging the material. They are putting more information into the description of each item and scanning a lot of the papers, so that all of the archived information is becoming available electronically.

An example of how this digitization can be useful: The Oakville Wind Orchestra (founded 1866) has the proud claim of being the oldest community band in Canada. Their archivist wanted to verify that claim, and came to the OHS asking for advice. We were able to find (see below) Oakville's Town

| TOWN OF OAKVILLE  |                 |
|---|-----------------|
| FOR 1874  |                 |
| 95  |                 |
| EXPENDITURE CONTINUED.  |                 |
| SPECIAL GRANTS.   |                 |
| Dominion day celebration .....                                    | \$ 23 00        |
| Agricultural Society, Trafalgar .....                             | 25 00           |
| B. S. Albertson, for band .....                                   | 100 00          |
| Mrs. Geo. Gerrie, for injuries .....                              | 60 00           |
| Capt. Albertson, for extra rations while<br>at Niagara Camp ..... | 12 60 \$ 231 20 |

Council Annual Report for 1874 that a special grant of \$100 was given to R. S. Albertson for the band, thus giving them older documented support of their claim than they previously had.

An interesting consequence of having access to the archived material is that we are able to see how someone changed Hazel's original description of an event. It may have been Hazel herself, or her editor, and since the book is over 500 pages long, perhaps the stories needed to be more succinct. But it seems a pity when you compare the following descriptions of the invention of the pea harvesting machine.

In the book, we have this brief paragraph: 'In 1887 the [Chisholm] brothers discovered that green peas could be hulled by impacting the pods, at a comparatively gentle velocity, while falling through the air. Their machine, patented first in Germany and later in the United States, extracted the peas undamaged; but the problem of separating [the released] peas from pods baffled the Chisholms until help was received from a chance acquaintance John Chisholm made in the United States.'

However, the same incident as described in Hazel's original notes is full of interesting vivid details:

One hot summer's afternoon in 1885, Jack [John Chisholm] was sitting in a saloon near Convention Hall in Baltimore, when a short well-knit man in working clothes entered. Seeing Jack in an attitude of dejection, he approached, remarking, 'You look about as cheerful as I feel.' Downing the contents of his glass, Jack replied, 'What the hell do you know how I feel?' Whereupon the two men began swapping stories of their troubles. The stranger was Robert P. Scott, popularly known as R.P., of the Sinclair Scott company, at that time the oldest manufacturer of food machinery on the continent . . . Reaching across the table, Jack Chisholm grasped R.P.'s hand, exclaiming, 'From now on, you and I are partners!'



Chisholm-Scott Company's bean snipping machines, another successful partnership.

Chisholm and Scott became partners and the Chisholm-Scott Pea Viner revolutionized the canning industry. These pea viners had a series of paddles which struck the pea pods, compressing the air inside which split the pods open and released the peas onto a conveyor belt. A single machine accomplished in one day what had required the labour of six hundred workers. The machines, each the size of a box car, sat permanently under a shed on the field, and the peas, sown like grain, were harvested in the same manner and brought by wagons to be fed into the viner. At one side, peas, graded as to size, rolled down into containers; on the other side, vines and pods were ejected to be used as cattle fodder. The packer paid the company three-quarters of a cent per can or 9 cents per dozen royalty for the use of the patents.

We can only wonder why such a lively fun story would have been reduced to such a short paragraph in the book. Look for more stories from the archives in future newsletters!

# A History of the Oakville Historical Society

From notes by Frances Robin Ahern

The Oakville Historical Society, formed in January 1953 by Hazel Chisholm Mathews, was the result of a succession of circumstances of historical interest in themselves.

To set the scene for this important event it is necessary to return to the 1930s when Hazel Mathews with her three children moved from the United States to occupy the former Customs House [now part of Erchless, the Oakville Museum]. This was owned by Hazel's mother, Mrs. John Chisholm, who in the 1920s had purchased the Erchless Estate which she wished to keep in the Chisholm family.

In converting the interior of a customs office building into living-quarters Hazel effected many renovations in the course of which, in 1938, a safe was opened revealing an invaluable collection of papers and documents pertaining to the Chisholm family and to widespread operations in the town in general. The combination to the safe had been lost and papers untouched for over half a century.

In possession of this sizable store of local history, Hazel then searched further, spoke to Oakville residents and was given more account books and photographs. Hazel then conceived the idea of amalgamating the information, so a book emerged—*Oakville and the Sixteen*.

Also David Arnott had a son, Son? 1810.  
 1866 census I add, Block 6 Lot D (part) next to  
 Barclay's. Near Millbrook (Newman Street) area.  
 1840 Map - name on Hydraulic Co.  
 Daughter Margaret (one of three) died 9 6-18-  
 same year when about 5 yrs old. (Chisholm)  
 Arnott came from Scotland - (Chisholm)  
 1851 census roll (4 of 2 up) same as above 1866.  
 1841 census list line lot 11, 2nd Sec. 7, D. 4.  
 6 in family

↑ see notes  
 end of page

Research notes compiled by Hazel Mathews.

By this time Hazel began to yearn for some space where her historically valuable collection might be preserved. In 1948 the large Kendall Leather Company building on the southwest corner of Navy and Colborne Streets [Lakeshore Road] burned to the ground, while a small derelict wooden building escaped the flames. This had been Oakville's first post office (in 1835). The property, which was by then owned by Trinidad Leaseholds Ltd. donated the building to the Town of Oakville and it was then moved to its present location at Lakeside Park on Front Street, which at the time was owned by Hazel and her sister Dr. Juliet Chisholm. In January 1953 the old post office and the land on which it stood was donated to the Town of Oakville. In the same month Hazel founded the Oakville Historical Society.



Preparing to move the Old Post Office from Lakeshore Road to Lakeside Park, 1950

In the 1950s the Department of National Defence occupied the property opposite St. Jude's Cemetery on Lakeshore Road West. This property had been owned by Merrick Thomas on which in 1829 he lived and added onto the existing house. In 1955 the Department, for a token amount of \$1.00, gave the original pioneer farmhouse to the Oakville Historical Society which moved it to Lakeside Park beside the Old Post Office.



The Thomas House on the move from Lakeshore Road & Dorval Drive to Lakeside Park, 1955

The first curator employed by the Historical Society was Susan Cuttell who got the museum off to a good start. On her resignation in 1956 Dorothy Denison was appointed curator and for the next fourteen years attracted a large following of her friends and younger enthusiasts who kept up with the demanding tasks of proper upkeep and repair of the museum collection of costumes and artifacts.

The Society presented informative speakers in various locations including the basement of the old Central Library, [previously a Post Office, a library and now Tommy Bahama at 216 Lakeshore Road], Knox Presbyterian Church Hall and New Central School.



An early OHS Plaque

In 1957 Hazel initiated the Plaque programme designating houses and other buildings of one hundred years or more. The owner was required to submit proof of age of the house and stand the cost of a plaque (initially \$7.00!).

The plaques placed on highly visible parts of buildings throughout town reminded citizens of the pre-1857 origin of many of the town structures.

When Hazel Mathews left Oakville in 1961 she left behind a keen and active historical society administrating two museums in the Old Post Office and the Thomas House. In the 1960s Janet Pullen in charge of Publicity initiated the first of countless informative periodical copies of the Newsletter.

Since the two museums remained closed from November to May, many different locations around town were used as storage for the many artifacts and collections. A permanent site was needed. When Erchless Estate came up for sale in 1966 the Society put in a plea that the municipality consider buying the property and turn it into a much-needed museum space. Instead it was bought by a developer who intended to turn Erchless into a high-rise and the grounds into a sub-division. But for a protective clause inserted when sold by the last of the Chisholm family owners the Erchless buildings could have been demolished on purchase. When in 1971 Erchless Holdings Ltd. applied to the Town for a subdivision permit for the estate the town in turn applied to the Conservation Review Board to designate the entire property as an historical site under the Ontario Heritage Act: the Board decided in the Town's favour. Mayor Harry Barrett and his Council held to a firm wish to purchase Erchless for the Town and negotiations continued until it purchased the grounds and buildings for \$550,000. In September 1980, Town Council recommended that the Customs House and the 'Big House' be used for a year-round exhibition and display space and in 1983 Erchless Museum was finally opened by the Oakville Historical Society although premises on Speers Road were leased to store its valuable collection of furnishings, costumes, artifacts and documents.

Erchless remained the Oakville Historical Society's home for the next decade.

See our September newsletter where we will explore the Society's next chapter.

# Laing Brothers Recall Early Days at Basket Factory

by Gord Reid

Eighty-year-old John Clarence Laing came to Oakville from Ahmic Harbour near Parry Sound in 1911 along with his parents and elder brother Loron, now 82. Loron worked at the Oakville Basket Factory for 30 years.

The Laings lived on Lakeshore Road across the street from the Hindmarshes who owned the Toronto Star. One of the Hindmarshes and [writer] Gordon Sinclair used to get the occasional piece of apple pie from the Laing household.

Loron recalls the year in 1911, when the MacLaren brothers (town contractors) put the first Italian immigrants to work digging trenches by hand for the construction of Highway Two. "Bill King, with the help of W. S. Davis, built the highway with cement. The bridges over Bronte Creek required two teams of horses and wagons to carry the steel stringers over." Loren's father was one of the teamsters.

The main thing Loren remembers about his days at the Basket Factory was the transportation of baskets by wagon and later by Chev truck in 1924. "The speed limit was 12 mph for a truck. Trucks were always overturning. I cut one of them in two and made it four feet longer by adding a four-foot drive shaft and panels. G.M. told me the warranty was void because I tampered with the truck's original length. Anyway I was a jack-of-all-trades: salesman, shipper-receiver and mechanic."

John 'Clare' Laing was named after his father. Clare rode a wagon around town delivering flour and chicken feed for Wally Wale's store. "We used the granary [105 Robinson St.] as a warehouse for storing hay and straw in 1914." Margaret Laing (nee Young), Clare's wife added, "We thought the building

in poor shape, full of mice. It was an old pile of fieldstones to us!" "The coal boats delivered coal between the bridge and the granary. I'm amazed at how much money the town councilmen have wasted deciding what to do with that granary," he said.



The Granary c1950s

During the year 1914 the circus rolled into town. "The circus paraded from the train station all the way to Aberdeen Bridge, over Sixteen Mile Creek. When the elephants began to cross the bridge they shook it so much they refused to go any further."





Oakville Basket Factory 1905

Those were the days when Lan-Muir Paints thrived on the present site of GM on Trafalgar Road. Canadian General Tower was originally known as the Royal Oak Tire Company and later Monsanto's. "It was the third main industry in Oakville next to Marlatt and Armstrong's tanneries and the Basket Factory."

"There used to be a tall chimney on the tannery. The tannery whistle blew to signal the fire alarms for the downtown people. One tannery was on the site of the new townhouses facing Sixteen Mile Creek. The other one was on the corner of Navy Street and Lakeshore Road. It burned down."

The Basket Factory served as Clare's first job. "Mose Hannah called some of us over to the factory when we were just kids. I never went to school in Oakville. We used to play in the streets until Mose got us some work. The one thing I learned to do fast when I came here was fight."

Clare spent a year at the factory. "We made leano covers (a veneer frame with a gauze mat in the middle). I was paid 15 cents for every 100 made. I earned about \$1.75 a week."

Clare had quite a few jobs between 1914 and 1919. Those were the war years in Canada. Work was rough and most men between the ages of 17 and 40 were in the armed forces. "A 14-year-old got a man's job. Once we worked 10 hours a day pouring cement for the Eaton's estate seawall. That job lasted until late in 1916 until it was too cold to pour cement. The Eaton's estate is now the Raymar estate."

Clare, like his brother Loron, did not wait to volunteer for duty during the First World War. He said, "At Victoria Hall, a returned veteran, Mr. Jack Barnes, who was wounded five

times (he was a policeman here for years) made us feel like cowards if we did not volunteer at the recruiting meeting."

Clare eventually went to Leaside [in Toronto] where he joined the Royal Flying Corp in 1917. Brother John joined the 3rd Canadian Engineers.

In the winter of 1917/1918 Clare was in Texas and returned home before the war ended in 1918. He recalls his first flight in an old two-seater Curtiss Jenny biplane. "Flight Lieutenant Coates wanted to show me my ambulance (I was a driver) from the air. The day before, a pilot had been killed while trying to come out of a tailspin. I panicked as we took off the runway and grabbed at the exhaust pipes for leverage. I burned my hands. I was not scared of the height, but the Lieutenant took me over my ambulance and put us in a nose dive, the plane spinning around. All I could see was my ambulance spinning!"

Following the war, Clare held a variety of jobs including log-making in northern Ontario. Working in the woods was no picnic, Mr. Laing said. "Those were the days before we had chainsaws.

Crosscut saws were used. With a good mate we could get 15 trees down in a day. Of course some trees were two to three feet in diameter.”

Clare met his wife-to-be Margaret Young, at the Jam Factory (near the present GO station) in 1919. They wed in 1922. Mrs. Laing still has the diamond ring Clare sent to her when he was in Detroit. It was wrapped in silk with a silver dollar.

After jobs in Detroit and Goderich, Mr. Laing returned to Oakville to work for Mr. William Whitaker and Sons, but he later lost his job as a mechanic owing to the Depression. Mr. Laing soon found work on Robinson Street as a mechanic. His brother bought a store, sold it, then purchased a farm near Milton.

One of the chief entertainments in Oakville used to be horseshoe tossing. There were 100 members who played throughout the year. Mr. Laing represented Oakville at the [Toronto] Royal Winter Fair three years in a row.

At the Jam Factory, George Robinson brought in berries by the case for the women to prepare on large tables. Clare had to make sure those tables were full at all times. The berries were processed in a large kitchen at the factory. “Oakville was famous for its strawberries. When visiting Toronto markets you used to hear ‘Oakville strawberries! Oakville strawberries!’ We had excellant jam at that factory!”

Rabbit hunting was another pastime for Mr. Laing and friends. He used to drive five or six men up north, but one day he decided to make a bank deposit on the way. He said, “My friends waited outside the bank, talking, their shotguns leaning beside them. I walked into the bank with my shotgun and made a bank deposit. You sure wouldn’t get away with that these days!”

Since the late 1940s Mr. Laing has lived at 131 Stewart Street in the house he built. A carpenter and mechanic for many years, Mr. Laing is still active at building or repairing things. Mr. and Mrs. Laing have four daughters and two sons.

From The Oakville Journal Record, January 14, 1981

# Membership

by Andrea Stewart, Marie Descent, Susan Bowen

Our current membership numbers 265 and we are pleased to welcome six new members since March: Ms. Amanda Bowman, Mrs. Jennifer Graham, Ms. Lucia Hernandez, Mr. And Mrs. Joe and Helen Marangi and Mr. Jeffrey Ward.



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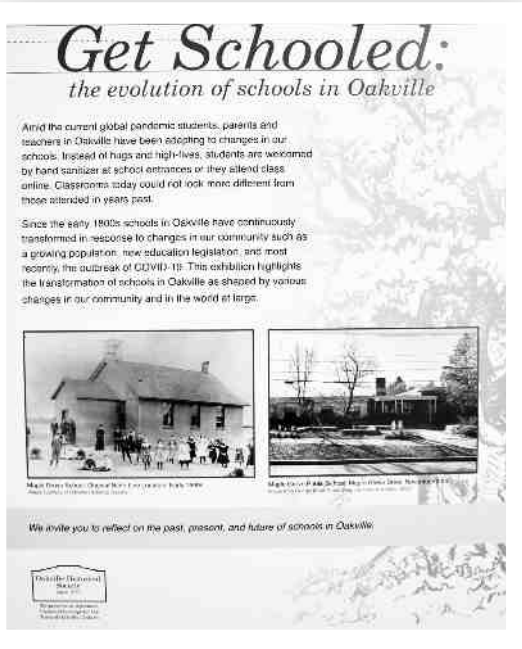
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Photos Steve Bysouth

The Oakville Historical Society was fortunate to have as an intern Julie Suh, who produced the exhibit, ‘Get Schooled: the evolution of schools in Oakville.’ Since we will soon be opening the offices at 110 King St. we invite you to visit and experience for yourself the history of education in our town.

## Gardens

The plants surrounding our offices are beginning to emerge from the warming soil and we have capable gardeners to encourage their growth. Attending to weeding, trimming and raking are gardeners Barbara Warden, Jim Bond, Nalin Gamage and Susan Bowen. Claudette Shaw will be caring for the Thomas House gardens ensuring they contain plants such as basil, onion, corn, parsley and potato, useful for a family in the mid 1800s - mid 1900s. Volunteer co-ordinator is Mary Davidson so contact her if you wish to join the team.

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# The *way* things were...



## Do you know?

This business?

The location?

*Look for the answers in our next issue!*

From March 2022 *The way things were...*

The Sixteen Mile Creek during the Spring ice break-up, looking north from the east shore. c1900



### Archive Hours:

Tuesday & Thursday 1:00 to 4:30 pm  
Third Sunday of the month 12:30 to 4:00 pm

905 844-2695 [www.oakvillehistory.org](http://www.oakvillehistory.org)

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