

Oakville Historical
Society
since 1953

Historical Society News

www.oakvillehistory.org



George Sumner in Indianapolis

Volume 56 Number 4

December 2022

A Note from the Society President

by George Chisholm

We were all shocked and devastated to hear of the sudden passing of Susan Wells, our long-time Vice President and Newsletter Editor. Susan was a very active member of the Society and you'll read elsewhere in this newsletter of her life and role with the Society. Our thoughts are with her family at this very difficult time. She will be missed.

My sincere thanks to Mark Verlinden and Madison Carmichael for completing the preparation of this issue of the newsletter. I'm told this is a one-off project for them and we are searching for a replacement editor. If you're interested or can suggest someone who might be, please contact me.

We had a very successful Ghost Walk season this fall thanks to the efforts of many volunteers led by Wendy Belcher, Mary Davidson, Marie Descent and Stan Smurlick. This has become an annual event for several families and brings many others to the downtown area. Credit is due to Francine Landry for starting the program. More volunteers are needed for next year so if you're interested, please let us know.

By now, if you're a member, you will have received an invitation to our annual members' wine and cheese event to be held Friday, December 2nd from 6:00 to 9:00pm. I'm hoping to see many of our members there.

Speaking of events, we're still looking for someone to take on organizing the potluck meal part of the Annual General Meeting held in March. Another volunteer(s) is/are needed to be in charge of the Mayor's Annual Picnic held in Lakeside Park in June.

It's interesting to note that many Historical Societies in Southern Ontario have suffered severe drops in membership during COVID. Our membership has grown and we sincerely appreciate financial donations made by visitors and members.

Membership

by Marie Descent

We are pleased to welcome 18 new members to the Society. New members since September are: Ms. Claire Sinclair, Mr. John Probert, Ms. Deb Haire, Ms. Sophia Xu, Mr. Ian Unwin, Ms. Star Helmer, Ms. Nadia Lopez, Mrs. Janie Fischbacher, Mr. Sebastian Nava Urribarri, Mr. Nick Cartwright, Mrs. Lois Rice, Mr. Robert Cook, Ms. Kelly Partington, Mr. Charles Wood, Ms. Marci MacDonald, Ms. Maya Szuber, Mrs. Ursula Terlecki, and Ms. Caroline Hogwood.

Book Sale

We need a few members to help out at the Book Sale planned for **December 10th & 11th from 1 - 4:00pm**. The books are those featured on our website.

Think Christmas presents!

Speaker's Nights: 2022 in Retrospect

by Steve Bysouth

We had another great selection of speakers in 2022, and we were able to return to in-person Speaker's Nights toward the end of the year.

The first three Speaker's Nights were all via Zoom calls. Bonnie Sitter shared many happy, and fun memories of Ontario's Farmerettes. Scott Bjorklund from the Lake Superior Marine Museum Association in Duluth, USA, shared great stories about the 150-year history of the Duluth Ship Canal. Our very own Intern Madison Carmichael did a great job telling the story of Captain Francis Brown and of all the research she did to pull the story together, culminating in the production of a video about him.

Our first in-person Speakers' Night in over two years was with Carolyn Van Sligtenhorst and Susan Schappert from Oakville Heritage Planning Services. They shared stories related to their work regarding heritage permits, policy projects and updates on the Old Oakville Heritage Conservation District Designation. In November, we heard a bit about the history of the Oakville Fire Department from Rick Barrett, a retired Captain on Ladder 232.

Thank you for your support in 2022, and we look forward to bringing you more great speakers and topics at our Speaker's Nights in 2023 with possibly a mix of Zoom calls and in-person events. We encourage you to drop any ideas you might have for future topics and/or speakers to Steve Bysouth at sbysouth2@gmail.com.

Did you know ... that our YouTube Channel @oakvillehistoricalsociety has over 45 historical videos about Oakville on it, including some past Zoom Speakers Nights that were recorded.



Oakville Historical Society
159 subscribers

The Gardens in 2022

by Mary Davidson

A word of praise to our gardeners, Barbara Warden, Jim Bond, Nalin Gamage and son Mezen, for their excellent care of the gardens around the offices, and the extras such as the hanging pot holders, made and installed by Nalin, the disposal of waste when needed by Jim and the continued supply of colour in the pots by Barbara. Thanks also to Susan Bowen who has been assisting with the fall clean up, which will hopefully be all over by the time this reaches you. We have had a wonderful summer and our gardens have been a constant pleasure, thanks to all of you.



A Tribute to Susan Wells

Susan Wells was an integral part of life at the Society. Beginning in 2010, she served as a director and accepted the role of Vice-President in 2013. She was the editor of this newsletter for many years, and we will all miss her very much. Below is her obituary, as provided by her family.

Susan was born February 2nd, 1952 in Newcastle, England to parents Dr John Morphy of Leith, Scotland and Jessie Catherine Morphy (nee Vass) of Balintore, Scotland. She died October 21st, 2022 in Oakville, Ontario from complications of bowel cancer chemotherapy.

Her family emigrated from Scotland to Canada in 1957 where she lived in Lancaster, New Brunswick and Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan with her older sister Ann Catherine Morphy and younger brother William Alexander Morphy. She attended Saskatchewan Technical Institute where she was the first woman to graduate from their Architectural Technology Diploma program. She worked for Cambrian Engineering in Saskatoon for 10 years in the 1970s and 1980s designing mining plant buildings and industrial facilities. She purchased and renovated her own home in Saskatoon. She met her husband Peter Frederic Wells while working on secondment at the Potash Corporation of Saskatchewan and they were married December 22nd, 1984. They moved to Apohaqui and Bathurst, New Brunswick and then Sudbury, Ontario where they lived for 10 years. The family moved to Oakville, Ontario in 2001 where she worked for Inco at Sheridan Park and retired in 2004. Susan lived in Belo Horizonte, Brazil in 2008 where she made many friends and returned frequently. She was the Vice President of the Oakville Historical Society, serving on the board for 12 years, writing the quarterly newsletter and giving tours. She was a dependable race committee member for the Bronte Harbour Yacht Club.

She was the mother of Heather Jessie Wells, Jane Rosemary Wells, Sophia Vass Wells, John Frederic

Wells and her step-daughter Jessica Anne Grace Wells. She loved words and learning about new places and people, exploring historical buildings, collecting art and lovely bits of anything. She made beautiful things her whole life through sewing, quilting, knitting and photography. She would proudly correct a superfluous decimal even if it meant she might get thrown out of the store. Her favourite part of being a mother was all the new adventures her children took her on, things she might not have thought to try otherwise. She loved her grandchildren Henry, Oliver, Felix, Andrew, June, Jasper and Leila, and especially loved handing them back when they started to cry. She was very proud of her Scottish heritage, and was responsible for leaving scotch for Santa and carrying our dark haired toddler brother over the threshold on New Years Day for good luck.



She knew who she was and what she wanted, and did not suffer fools gladly. After Susan met and befriended you she kept your friendships. She had friends that she made in grade school. She wanted us to know that she did her best and to hear that it was enough. She was a vibrant, loving, funny woman who we are all very proud of and we miss her deeply.

Our Haunting Season Has Ended

by Wendy Belcher

The Ghosts of Oakville have waved goodbye after another spooky season. The Society hosted 37 evening walks with 371 adults and 179 kids. We also did one bus tour and seven daytime presentations for 96 seniors. Revenue is approximately \$5000 with Ghost Walk guests donating \$546 on top of their ticket prices.

Thanks to Mary Davidson for helping to organize both the students and Society members who hosted our evenings. Thanks to Marie Descent who was in charge of reservations, and all those who did host at both the Coach House and our office. Thanks to Stan Smurlick who ran our website. Thanks to 24 students who roamed the streets in character adding ambience to our Walks or served as caterers, keeping the cookies and hot cider coming. And a big thanks to our ghosts - Wendy Belcher (Esther Thomas), Tina Driscoll (Miss Andrews), Carol Gall (Tillie Chisholm), Stephen Johnson (Father Ryan), Mary Beth Niebert (Isabella Land Chisholm), Brooke Nelson (Mary Jane Chisholm McDougald), Stan Smurlick (Constable Sumner), Dirk Soeterik (RK Chisholm), and Stewart Sherriff (Peter McDougald).

The veil between our world and that of our Oakville ghosts has closed until next year.



Kevin Brown with Tilley



Esther Thomas and Father Jeremiah Ryan

Ghost Walks 2023

Next year we will be looking for help with Ghost Walks and have in mind a core group who will be responsible for all that goes into creating this very popular event. You can help in different areas by being ghosts, street characters, hosts, caterers, costume creators (some existing outfits may need a bit of creative help). We have the necessary tools to do these walks, but we need more members to assist with the execution so that the work can be shared and carried on by our members with ease.

We will send out a request to members early next year and arrange an information/training session for those interested in supporting this great fundraiser.

George Sumner and the Indianapolis Link

by Andrea Stewart

A recent enquiry from Irvington Historical Society in Indianapolis became the beginning of an exciting exchange. They had recently been working on some 350 glass plate negatives gifted to them in 2000, which dated back to the 1890s. These images were found by a resident under the basement stairs of an old house which he had recently purchased. The only clue to the identity of these images was the that the house had once been owned by one Osbert Sumner and when they searched his name on the internet, they came across our website and a picture of Oakville's most well-known historical character, George Sumner (1834-1911), father of Osbert. The Oakville Historical Society's online collection gave them an important lead on the pictures.



George Sumner perched on the Oakville pier, c. 1898.

Oakville's Chief Constable from 1865-1902, George Sumner served variously as the collector of taxes, Harbour Master, and guardian of the Town Hall. In addition, he helped build lake schooners and worked with grain merchants, loading ships. He managed immigrants who came through town. He sat up with many of Oakville's leading citizens in their final



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Working on the Sumner collection.

hours and observed their funerals. He rounded up stray dogs and roaming pigs and, in the spring, he inspected everyone's backhouses for proper treatment! All this, he meticulously recorded in his invaluable daily diaries which give us an important look into the lives of everyday people and the times.

Danita Davis of the Irvington Historical Society visited us recently from Indianapolis with clear, detailed prints taken from the glass plate negatives. What excitement as we gathered in the library, matching up their prints with ours and identifying never before seen pictures of people and boats from the past as well as scenes of Oakville and area.



Osbert Sumner, in double exposure.

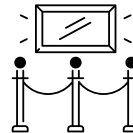
Amazingly, some of these photographs have been in our collection for decades as prints. What a coincidence that these images have survived all these years so far apart from one another and, further, that Irvington Historical Society was able to locate the information on our website. Had we not begun the digitization and publication of our collection six years ago, the background of the prints would forever remain obscured.

There are pictures of George's visit to his son, Osbert, in Indianapolis, in August 1898. As a coincidence, we discovered that George's diaries enabled us to put an exact date on a few of the photographs.

The Irvington Historical Society uses the same Past Perfect software as the Oakville Historical Society to catalogue its collection, though it's not yet publicly available. They have agreed to provide us with 79 high-resolution images that include photos of George Sumner, Osbert, his family and various scenes in Oakville and the surrounding area. We are very happy to be able to add these images to our online collection, with full acknowledgement for the source of the images. In particular, there are some really nice photos of George Sumner himself that we have never seen before. As well, we gain some excellent images straight from the negatives that previously came only from one hundred- and thirty-year-old prints.



We hope to continue a friendly relationship with the Irvington Historical Society and are excited with the prospect of a co-operative exhibition in the future.



*Irvington Historical Society's Collection.
Prior to the construction of the west pier, c.1890s*



*Oakville Historical Society's Collection
Features the new pier built c.1900*

A Beloved Childhood Home

By Patricia Stephenson



317 Lake Shore Road West, Sheila's childhood home.

On Sheila's living room wall above the sofa, hangs a poster size black-and-white photograph of her childhood home. In the picture is a two-storey brick house with Tudor-style influences, and with a spacious sunroom to catch the rays of the late afternoon sun. There is an outbuilding partially obscured by the house, and just beyond it, towering Lombardy Poplars line the northern edge of the 2.5 acre property.

In the summer of 1950, Sheila was four years old and her sister was 11, when her family moved to the rural property at 317 Lake Shore Road West in Trafalgar Township (now Lakeshore Road West in Oakville). The house was built in 1931, and set well back from the road. Sheila recalls the fabric awnings that shaded every window, and the task her father had of removing the awnings every autumn, and reinstalling them in the spring.

The outbuilding, referred to as The Chicken House, was a large two-storey barn-like building that served multiple purposes. The first floor was divided into three separate sections: One side was used to house chickens, the opposite side was a one-bedroom apartment, and in the middle was a garage without doors. The second floor contained three rooms, and was accessible only by using an outside staircase located at each end of the building.

The apartment was rented out to several tenants over the years, including a Dutch husband and wife who professed to have been spies during the Second World War. In addition, says Sheila, the wife proclaimed to be a concert pianist and "she often came into our house and played the piano." Another tenant "got his gun out and shot the fox that was catching our chickens!"

Of all the tenants, Sheila had grown especially fond of the Tessel family. "Mrs. Tessel was a dressmaker," she says. "She made my first ballet outfit." Sheila recalls being in awe of the beautiful dresses that she made for her clients. Just as memorable, were the "candied almonds that she made and the most delicious pancakes!" In time, Mrs. Tessel's sister joined her family and rented a room on the second floor of The Chicken House. As the Tessel family grew, Sheila's father had a one-room addition built onto the apartment to serve as an extra bedroom. By the early 1960s, The Chicken House had been relocated to Speers Road.

During her childhood and early adolescence, Sheila spent many carefree hours at the estates directly across Lake Shore Road. She recalls the adventures she had with a friend who lived at the Shorewood estate — "building forts in the woods and picking wild flowers" and swimming in the pool. In winter, there was the rush of sliding down a big sled run. She remembers building a raft with friends and swimming from the stony beach at the Holyrood estate.

Yet, Sheila didn't have to go far to find entertainment. Her home was surrounded on three sides by neighbouring fields: Horses grazed in the pasture to the east and to the north was a large deep pond, with frogs that croaked throughout the night. "I used to catch tadpoles and keep them in smaller quarters while they developed into frogs," she says. Even more enjoyable, was the pond in winter. "It was one of my favorite places to be — skating and playing hockey at any time of day or night with some of the local boys. How I loved that!"

Sheila took a keen interest in helping her father care for their chickens. In addition to The Chicken House, she says, "there were two chicken coops, each about the size of a small shed, and a hen house with an outside run." Besides the fox, "weasels also went after the chickens, but our dog Spot, a fox terrier mix, took care of that."

"We used to get a truckload of baby chicks delivered every so often," says Sheila. In preparation of their arrival, "my mother would get the brooder in The Chicken House ready so that it was nice and warm." As much as she enjoyed chicken farming, there was one part that did not appeal to her: "Poor creatures, they would grow and lay eggs, and then after a while, get killed for their meat. My father would often kill a chicken for our dinner, and my mother would clean it." Even so, she accompanied her father on his chicken deliveries to a farm in Milton.

The eggs were sold locally, and Sheila gladly delivered them to customers who lived within a short walking distance of her home. On Saturdays, she went with her father to make egg deliveries to customers who lived on Christina Drive and on the east side of town. Her father would wait in the car, while she took the eggs to customers' doors and collected the money.

"Summertime was work!" states Sheila. "There was a lot of picking to do." Her father, an agronomist, had a tremendous garden at the front of the property, close to Lake Shore Road. "He grew lots of asparagus — I would pick baskets of it. My father would bunch it up, weigh it and sell it." He also cultivated and planted corn, carrots, potatoes, strawberries, raspberries and Gladiolas. She recalls the striking killdeer birds that nested on the ground between the asparagus plants. "If I got too close to their nests, they'd get very upset — they'd pretend they had a broken wing to lead me away from the nest." Sheila's younger sister was much too young to help in the garden, and her older sister was away at nursing school. "But I liked it and always had friends helping me. My mother knew how much work it was and she would help me too."



Sheila, 1954

Sheila sold fruits and vegetables from a roadside stand at the bottom of their driveway. And when her pet rabbit, Frisky, had babies old enough to leave their mother, they too were sold at the roadside stand. The Gladiolas were sold to the Century Theatre for the lobby. Pears, apples and white cherries were grown for the family's own use — in particular, Sheila's father made apple cider with a cider press. He also made "a pretty lethal dandelion wine!" says Sheila.

The cider, wine, vegetables, and her mother's canning were stored in the cold room under the sunroom. Sheila remembers when the cold room could be accessed from the outside: The sunroom stairs would pivot upward, revealing a door that would lead down to the storage area. Storing foods that needed to be kept frozen, took a bit of planning. In the years before Sheila's parents owned a freezer, they rented a freezer locker located in a building on Colborne Street (now Lakeshore Road East).

Another vivid childhood memory, says Sheila, was the kindness of her family's health care provider, Dr. E.P. Soanes. "My mother thought the world of Dr. Soanes." And if time permitted, she adds, "My mother would make a loaf of bread to give him on his home visits."

Sheila began her schooling at Westwood Public School and then transferred to the newly built W.H. Morden Public School, conveniently located just beyond the field behind her house. She attended Thomas A. Blakelock High School, then Gordon E. Perdue High School, the new school that was built in the pasture next to her home. She finished secondary school at Albert College in Belleville.

In 1966, Sheila moved to Toronto and attended The Wellesley Hospital School of Nursing. A year later, she enrolled in the Welfare Services Program at Ryerson Polytechnical Institute. After graduating in 1969, she remained in Toronto and worked for the Ontario Government in Legal Aid. That same year, she was dismayed to learn that her parents had sold most of the land surrounding their house to a developer. The plan would include building 11 new houses and a cul-de-sac named Tavistock Square —



Sheila, 1970

her childhood house would be incorporated into the development, with a change of address and a new suburban-size lot.

In the autumn of 1972, Sheila spotted a magazine advertisement promoting a trip from England to India that piqued her interest. Shortly afterwards, a friend introduced her to another travel enthusiast. The two young women hardly knew each other when they set out on their trip, she says, yet it worked out well, and their friendship remains strong to this day.

Sheila and her travelling companion boarded a bus in London, England and travelled for three months through Europe, the Middle East and Asia to Nepal — at times camping, and at other times, staying in cheap hotels. In Nepal, Sherpa guides carried their camping equipment, while they hiked over hills, showered under waterfalls and camped with other young people on the trip. “We hiked all the way to the Chinese border. It was absolutely grand!” she says. The trip ended in Kathmandu, Nepal, however, Sheila was not ready to return home.

Instead, Sheila travelled solo by train from Calcutta (now Kolkata) to Bombay (now Mumbai), where she embarked on a freighter bound for Australia. She immediately sent a telegram to her parents who would have been anxiously waiting to hear from her. It took almost two months for the ship to reach Australia.

There were many stops along the way, at times lasting a few days, while cargo was moved on and off the ship. On those occasions, members of the ship’s crew provided excursions for passengers. And once, says Sheila, to her horror, an elephant destined for a zoo was hoisted by crane onto the ship. “It was sad to watch.” For three days she sailed, “with an elephant chained by foot to the deck. It was not happy — moving its head back and forth, back and forth.”

While in Sydney, Sheila stayed briefly with a young couple she had met on the freighter, after which she boarded a bus and headed to Kyabram, Victoria, to work at a cannery. Although “the work was boring,” she says, “I had a fantastic time!” Most of the labourers were about Sheila’s age, and she easily made friends. While in Australia, she had a visit from her parents. Afterwards, she met up with a friend from the cannery and together they took a ship to New Zealand. Eighteen months later, they returned to Australia. From there, Sheila sailed to Florida and to the Bahamas, then headed for home.

When Sheila arrived at her childhood home, she was taken aback and greatly saddened by the “drastically changed” landscape. The property that her family once owned, had become a completed housing development. Even so, there was some comfort in the fact that the house, where her parents still lived, remained unaltered.

“When I left on the trip, I thought I’d be gone for a year,” admits Sheila, instead, the adventure lasted five years. She travelled — she worked — she travelled — she worked. She canned peaches, picked apples, worked as a waitress and hotel hostess, cleaned rooms and served meals at a retirement home. All of her overseas employment consisted of “live-in jobs with meals provided.”

In contrast, after she returned home, Sheila resumed her career as a Welfare Worker with the Ministry of Community and Social Services. Over the years, she would visit Australia several times.

Change is inevitable, Sheila concludes. “Nevertheless, I have these lasting memories of growing up at 317 Lake Shore Road West.” Recalling her childhood and youthful adventures, she says, has “unleashed such pleasant memories of earlier years — and they are such fine memories.”



New Exhibit Features HMCS Oakville

by George Chisholm

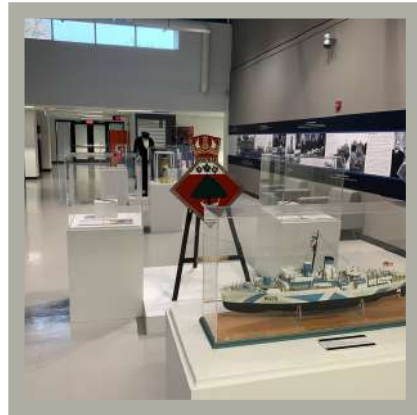
Over the past couple of years I've had the opportunity to work in a supporting capacity with Carolyn Cross, Curator of Collections at the Oakville Museum, and Sean Livingston, author of "Oakville's Flower, the History of the HMCS Oakville", on the creation of an exhibit on the Corvette HMCS Oakville which was christened in Oakville in 1941.

Carolyn has done her usual excellent work in preparing this exhibit. It features the original bell, an original ship's crest (courtesy of Darryl Litchfield), a uniform, loads of photographs and artwork (some of which are on loan from our

Society) and other items. Also featured is the wardroom clock which came from the Oakville yacht Aggie and was lent to the ship by the Marlatt family for the duration of the war. Some years ago the clock was given to the Oakville Historical Society.



Model of HMCS Oakville on loan from the Society, built by Jack and Harry Barrett.



The exhibit is at the Queen Elizabeth Park Community and Cultural Centre for at least a year. It's hoped that it will eventually be a permanent exhibit at Town Hall. It's well worth a visit.

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The way things were...



Do you know...

How was the building on the left used at this time?

When was this photo taken?

From Sept. 2022

This anchor is currently located at the front of the the Bronte Harbour Yacht Club. It was donated by Mr. Wilf Locking and was originally from the Canadian Steamship Liner "Dalhousie City", a steamer sailing from Toronto to Port Dalhousie during the twenties, thirties and early forties.



Archive Hours:

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

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