

**Some Personal Reminiscences, on the Embryonic, Early Development, Growth, and
Mature Years of the Aurora Historical Society [AHS]**

**A Chronicle of Aurora's Transition from 20th Century, Post WWII, Modern Times
to 21st Century, Post Modern Times, and a Cultural Age**

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July 2024**

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Preamble

The year 2023 was the 60th anniversary of the Aurora Historical Society (AHS). It was a significant event for me, as the founding president, and as one that served on the AHS board for some 38 years. The Society has been pretty much life's work, triggering many thoughts of years gone by.

For my part, I was born and lived a lifetime in Aurora, as a 4th generation Oliver, of a family who immigrated in the late 1800's. It was then that George Oliver took up a land grant in Aurora's adjacent Whitchurch Township. And now I find myself living in Owen Sound, as an "Aurora expatriate", along with my wife Mary Jeanne, in order to be closer to our eldest son Bill.

As a consequence, these reminiscences come from memory - with much of the detail long gone and with the Society's archives unavailable on-line. Accordingly, with apologies, these notes exclude the names of the principal players to which I owe so much in my years with the Society, including the support of all those Aurora mayors, councillors, and my AHS colleagues in arms many, as I was caught up in the desire to contribute, voluntarily, to the life and culture of their community.

That having been said, I do include the names of three quintessential individuals, without whom the AHS story could not be rightly told: E.H., [Ernest] Clarke, the Society's godfather and guardian angel [See Postscript], Jacqueline Stuart, Church School Museum Curator, Collections

Manager, and consummate storyteller of Aurora, its people and times, and to Dr. John McIntyre, also past president, for his advocacy and professional expertise, especially in bringing Hillary House under the custodial care of the Society, as National Historic Site.

In recognizing and celebrating the Society's 60th anniversary, I muse on the Society's life experience, its struggles, and accomplishments, now as a recognized leader among Canadian volunteer, community-based, historical societies. I muse, too, over the birthing of the organization, its early struggle for public and political recognition, and the support of municipal council, achieved often through stormy times. In retrospect, in all this, the Society has been fortunate to have been able to contribute to its times, moving with its times, as part of a larger public good, made possible by its times.

Seen in retrospect, the times have been ones of quiet, cultural revolution, and transition. Here opinion around the municipal council table would evolve dramatically, from, Municipal Council having no place in Aurora's cultural life, to the current opening of a multi-million-dollar cultural centre, to which the subtitle of these notes: *A Chronicle of Aurora's Transition from 20th Century, Post WWII, Modern Times, to 21st Century, Post Modern Times and the Cultural Age*.

Throughout this transition, AHS has been a responsible advocate and activist, a participant-observer to Aurora's transition to what has been called a "cultural age". The challenge in documenting these personal reminiscences, given their momentous shift in world view, has been to do so with clarity, objectivity and brevity.

Personal Reminiscences

Starting at the beginning, I recall, with thanks, the wisdom of Ruben Nelsen, Foresight Canada, that, as a 21st century Western people: *"history is not merely a place to find comforting images of the past, nor measures of human progress, but the place where richer fuller understandings of the future can be found... That we anticipate and plan for the future drawing on the wisdom of the past, but with knowledge and understandings of the conditions and needs of the future ... and further that history and the task of living in history are central, in coming to an ever-deeper maturity"*.

On the role and contribution of history to one's life and times, I recall, from my earliest childhood years, that the notions of "history" and "historic knowledge" have always had a certain fascination - as concept, construct, principle, and key idea. Throughout life, I have been fascinated by what history teaches and foretells of the future.

So it was that in 1962, as a young man, with a wife and 3 young children, and with a professional life to navigate, that a local elder statesman and neighbor, E. H., (Ernest) said to me, on the street one summer's evening, "The Aurora's Centennial is coming up next year, we need to recognize its historic significance, possibly by establishing a local historical society".

E. H. was likely then in his 70's, a respected, well-educated for the times, well read, and a man in which I saw the wisdom of the ages. A few weeks later, he asked me to attend a gathering of several other local social and cultural leaders. We convened in a storybook Victorian parlor, on

Victoria Street, the home of a late successful downtown merchant. Looking back, it was an historic setting for an historic event - for it would be a kind of AHS Founding Meeting. So, when I was asked, at the meeting, surrounded by my elders of many years, who is going to take the lead in this venture. E. H. said “you are” – and the rest is history.

Over the next few months, the AHS, with the support of the mayor’s office and requisite legal counsel, the Society was chartered as one of the first, volunteer, citizen-based municipal historical societies in Canada - to be charged with responsibilities for community cultural development. And the rush was on.

Arrangements were made for gratuitous space in “Doane Hall”, the then somewhat dilapidated, but truly magnificent, Greek Revival, Yonge Street home of Aurora’s first mayor, slated for demolition. With the support of the current owner, the Society’s archives will tell the story of the two-room, elegant, centennial museum, created with the assistance of professional support imported from Toronto. Most importantly, the Society’s Centennial Museum featured historic artifacts and archival materials on loan and gifted for this celebrious event, so it was that the “Aurora Collection” was borne.

The Society’s Embryonic and Early Development Years

At the outset, I recall the 1960’s, when public affairs and the public business of mayor and council were conducted quite differently to those of the 21st century. Municipal Council met, behind closed locked doors, in an improvised town hall on Yonge Street, much like a secret society. To address Council, I was to give two weeks’ notice, and then to wait patiently out in a narrow draughty hallway for the door to be ceremoniously unlocked by the Town Clerk who, without a word spoken, directed me to my seat.

It was a period in which independent, publicly sanctioned, historical Societies, with clearly documented, officially sanctioned, public mandates, like the AHS, were an oddity at the time. And municipal councillors were uncertain as how to treat them, whether as friend or foe. And were often treated variously as both, in requests for financial support, and in lobbying for shifts in public policy and priority in the cultural and social affairs of community.

Looking back, I well recall of those early, formative years in the life of the Society in which its agenda seemed to merge, quite naturally, into two, often interrelated, main streams – community cultural development and interpretation, focused on museology and curation, and political advocacy in the cause of community cultural conservation.

In terms of advocacy, the rush of post WWII, commercially driven, urban development was on, with its many battles both won and lost. The AHS, and its brother-in-arms, the Aurora Heritage Committee would be in the midst of it all – much as the Society’s archival records and local press coverage of the times will tell:

- With AHS leading the way, municipal council established one of the first LACAC’s in Ontario for the protection of its valued historic and culturally significant properties.

- A comprehensive municipal inventory of properties in the historic core would be undertaken with AHS's leadership and resources.
- With the support of municipal council, working with the assistance of provincial and federal agencies, Aurora would emerge as a recognized provincial and national leader in community cultural heritage and conservation practice.
- The records will tell, too, of the municipal, provincial, and national recognitions received by those early volunteers - variously advocating for AHS, and the Aurora Heritage Committee (LACAC).

Meanwhile, through the work of then board chair John Macintyre and Jackie Stuart, with the support of municipal council, the first Church Street School Museum would be established in two classrooms of the historic, decommissioned school building. The museum would provide a new public face for the AHS. Jackie Stuart would be a personification of the Society, the one that would introduce several generations of children to Aurora's history and culture through the Aurora Collection, and her many stories told of place and times.

Indeed, the 1960's were exciting times for the embryonic Society. In discussions with other municipal, provincial, and national agencies, we explored what the times required of our fledgling volunteer group in matters of advocacy, program development, and promotion. How could the AHS best contribute to a new kind of, mid-20th century, cultural modernity, one concerned with the emerging role of historic knowledge, and the contribution of cultural conservation to an increasingly, layered, and complex, mid-20th century, modern world of public affairs?

In retrospect, the Society was vaguely aware that it was now in rapidly changing times, as an integral part of a new public cultural agenda, one in which the AHS, along with the LACAC had, themselves, helped to create as significant, local players, once more seemingly "on the right side of history". The seeming threats to cherished cultural and social landmarks, and understandings (e.g., road widenings, demolitions of culturally significant structures) had led to angry delegations to Council, with widely debated, pressures for change in public policies, standards, and practice. Again, in retrospect, it was all about the prospects of a newly emerging millennium, a post-modern, information, society, and the early years of Canada's new culturally driven times.

Among other thinkings, culture had gone mainstream on the public and political agendas of the period, along with it the work of the Aurora Historical Society, as a principal driving force. Again, the archives will tell of the Society's contributions to those times helping to craft the new national, provincial, and municipal, policies and practices required of the vastly changing times.

The Society's Growth and Mature Years

Meanwhile, as a principal marker of the Society's growing maturity, AHS archives and the local press will also tell how:

Under the leadership of John McIntyre, through agreements with the Hillary and Van Nostrand families, and federal, and provincial government agencies, the Society would take on responsibilities of ownership, preservation, promotion, and public programming of Hillary House, as a significant, Canadian National Heritage site. Possibly the only Canadian, volunteer-based organization in Canada to take on such responsibilities.

- The acquisition of a national historic site would, quite rightly, significantly redefine much of the business and priorities of the Aurora Historical Society. Yet, in its decision, the Board was well aware that, beyond Hillary House, and the significant stories of community and times told, there was a much larger, serious piece of work to be done. For with Ruben Nelson, and by reason of its original charter, it was abundantly clear that the Society must draw much more widely on the history and wisdoms of Aurora's past, in helping to create an ever-deeper maturity of individual and community thought.
- The AHS would go on to sponsor, typically, as fund raisers, professionally guided annual house tours, walks, and motor tours, along with interpreted Hillary House tours. Prior to Covid, the annual Hillary House Ball was, for many years, Aurora's socio-cultural event of the year.
- In fact, the public programming of the Society would help to punctuate Aurora's social and cultural calendar, including: a monthly speaker, special theme events at Hillary House, walking and motor tours to heritage sites and events, historic house tours, as well as the annual, grand Hillary House Ball.
- To follow in the period would be another historic decision, to turn over AHS's founding "Aurora Collection" to the then newly minted municipal Aurora Museum and Archives (AMA) where it quite rightfully likely belonged. There the collection would be under due legislative protection, as gifts-in-kind, of historic, community significance. The transfer was, itself, a significant accomplishment providing a major milestone in the current development of the Aurora Cultural Centre, itself to be a centerpiece of the Aurora Town Square scheduled to open in September 2024.
- Through the period, the Society's work would profit from the contributions made by numerous studies by provincial, national and international agencies of government, and academia. As often happens, theory was catching up to practice, here in the fields of cultural conservation, cultural heritage, and community cultural development. The literature of the time would include explorations in concept development, and theory building, as well as in the documentation of hard won experience in jurisdictional, policy, and program development. (See especially the work of the Ontario Ministry of Culture and Recreation's Ontario Heritage Review.) Here, as the archives and public press of the time will tell, the AHS and the Aurora's LACAC were often cited for their leadership and community contribution.

Some Concluding Thoughts

Looking back, with all its challenges, the Aurora Historical Society has been on a bit of a roll, having attracted a number of dedicated adherents, friends, advocates, and achievements it can point to. The Society has managed to build a modicum of public and Municipal Council respect, bringing with it best wishes, quiet moral and financial support, for which it is most grateful.

All along, there has been a sense among the Society's Board members, general membership, financial supporters, and community aficionados, that the AHS was on the right track, again on "the right side of history". For these were, in fact, the post WWII years, bringing with them the promise of social and cultural renewal, based on a new kind of 20th century cultural modernity of thought and action.

Currently, with the grand opening of a multimillion-dollar Aurora Town Square it has indeed been a kind of quiet revolution, and an exercise of achievement in community cultural development, one step at a time - often with the enablement of the Aurora Historical Society and its multiple volunteers. It is difficult to imagine that day when cultural matters and community cultural development were viewed as ultra vires, well beyond the responsibilities and interests of Aurora's Municipal Council.

My thanks to all those named and unnamed volunteers, who have filled the president's chair, serving on the board, and the trenches, variously, over the last 60 years. My thanks too, to succeeding Aurora's mayors and councillors, over often stormy times, for their ongoing moral, financial, and public support of the Society and its causes. For through it all, mayor and council have grown with the Society and emerging public thought - beginning to understand what the 21st century requires of us all in matters of community, social, and cultural development.

I return, then, to where I began, to the life-springs of the Society, to Ernest Clarke's belief in *the centrality of historic knowledge of community*, and to Ruben Nelsen's confirmation of the centrality of history in human affairs as "*the place where richer fuller understandings of the future can be found*", along with an "*ever-deeper human maturity*"

Seen in a larger perspective, what these reminiscences begin to chronicle is Aurora's passage through Canada's post WWII modern times, to 21st century, postmodern times, to a new millennium, and to what has been said to be a new "Cultural Age" (D. Paul Schafer, World Cultures Project, 1998). Dramatically, Aurora's Municipal Council's priorities have shifted from "potholes" to "cultural wellbeing", and with it a multi-million dollar investment in 21st century cultural infrastructure and public programming.

GLO, Owen Sound Ontario, July 2024

Postscript

Ernest Clarke and Lester Pearson were life-long friends, as classmates at Victoria Collage, University of Toronto. Both, each in his own way, would be advocates and activists for a new 20th Century liberal democracy, exploring what it might achieve in their post WWII, times. Lester Pearson's father was a former pastor at the Aurora United church. The image is of Pearson and Clarke together, in Aurora, November 1968, in celebration of the church's 150th anniversary. It would be a brief moment in time, for both men would shortly pass on. (Photo by Leslie Oliver)

