

Historically Speaking

The Newsletter of the Cobourg and District

Historical Society

Summer 2021 — Issue 324

Summer Edition

It is usual for the Cobourg and District Historical Society to publish monthly newsletters only from September to May since many of our members are away during the Summer. With COVID-19 restrictions most of us are staying close to home so the CDHS Executive decided that a Summer Edition would keep everyone in contact and give those having mandated staycations a little additional reading material. It is also a chance to share content other than the usual fare. Stay tuned for the usual September newsletter!

Barnum House Webinars

by Diane Chin

In March of 2019, the Cobourg & East Northumberland Branch of ACO (ACO C&EN)

entered, along with the Provincial Office, into a Permission to Enter Agreement with the Heritage Trust who owns Barnum House. Prior to that time, Barnum House had stood empty for many years except for the occasional ACO meeting. Now it serves as the office for the ACO C&EN as well as a venue for local and ACO events.



As many of you know, Barnum House is thought to be the founding reason for ACO. Eric Arthur, a Professor of Architecture at the University of Toronto, discovered Barnum House in 1933 while scouring Ontario with his students to document the architecture of the

province. He wrote: "There is no house of similar size and material in the United States that is the superior of the Barnum House at Grafton, Ontario."

Arthur continued: "It was at that point that I found that the house and 98 acres with a



running stream and land on both sides of the highway could be bought for \$4500. My salary at the University had diminished with periodic cuts in the depression to \$2900, and \$450, necessary as a deposit, put quite a strain on the

family resources. Somehow it was arranged and the urgent problem arose, not only of reimbursing me, but of finding \$4500. I knew few people, but the late Mr. J. S. McLean, Mr. R.A. and Mr. Walter Laidlaw, and Mr. Douglas Duncan, all, later, good friends of the Conservancy, were enough in the initial emergency to settle the bill and allow the Arthurs to eat. Now that we had an unpainted house and a ruinous barn on our hands, it was obvious that something more had to be done. At a meeting in Toronto, the Conservancy was born."

In the spirit of that significance and during times when we could not hold events at Barnum House, the ACO C&EN Board endeavoured to still bring Barnum House to the people in a virtual way through webinars. The webinars can be watched at

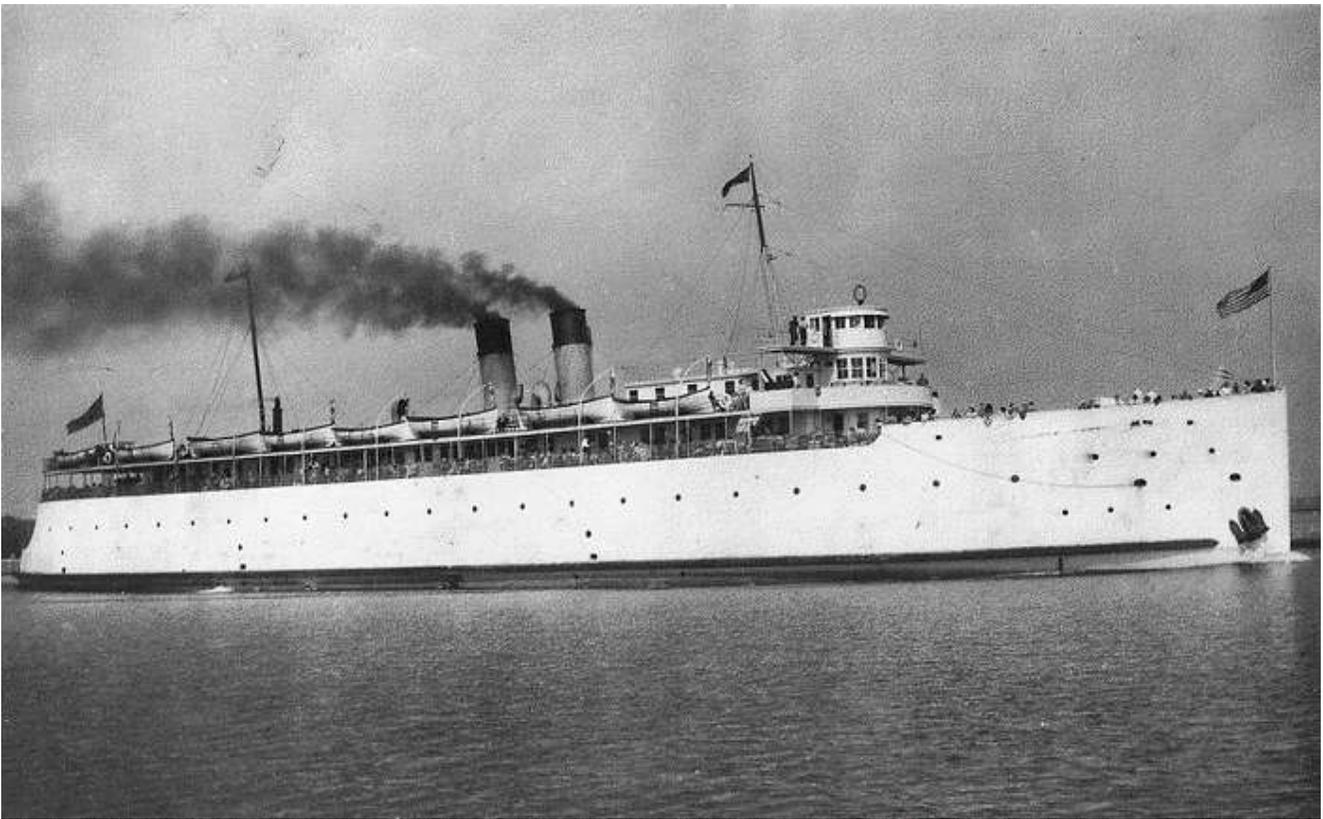
https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCcTnkTs-wZZ57B_7y_Rdbgw

The creators of the webinars, Alice and Evan McMurty, have an interesting website at www.mcmurtrycreative.ca

ACO C&EN hope to open the house again when it is allowable and hold events there. Stay tuned for updates.

Cobourg to Rochester

Most CDHS members know that there was a ferry between Cobourg and Rochester. This ferry ran from 1907 to 1950. Daily trips of the Ontario 1 and Ontario 2 transported iron ore to Rochester and brought coal to Cobourg. In addition, the ferries brought thousands of tourists to town over the years. If you would like to learn more, a good first step is the website at <https://www.cobourghistory.ca/histories/cobourg-s-rail-car-ferry-history/70-cobourg-s-rail-car-ferry-history-part-1> If you want to know even more about the Cobourg to Rochester ferry, Ted Rafuse's definitive book *Coal to Canada: A History of the Ontario Car Ferry Company* is out-of-print but it is occasionally available from sellers of used books.



What is less well known is that there were other ferries on the Great Lakes and one is still making daily runs. The S.S. Badger makes daily trips between Ludington, Michigan and Manitowoc, Wisconsin.



The S.S. Badger is the last of the railroad car ferries that once crossed the Great Lakes, and is the last coal-fired passenger steamship in the United States. The S.S. Badger was built in 1952 for Chesapeake & Ohio Railroad's service across Lake Michigan and was operated by the C&O until 1980. For a few years she was used for rail freight only. However, since 1992

she has operated with an emphasis on leisure travel, tourism, and commercial truck traffic. If you are intrigued by the possibility of sampling a bit of Great Lakes history and are not daunted by a twenty-hour road trip, you can book your ferry ride online at <https://www.ssbadger.com/>



A Sewer Brat's Tale

by Wally Keeler

For a time we were the Sewer Brats, meeting every Saturday afternoon at the Midtown Restaurant, to debrief ourselves on our illicit adventure of the day.

We were boys of single digit age. The dam holding back the accumulating reservoir of raging hormones was yet to come to crisis. To a boy, we had our distinctive club cologne — the Scent of Sewage. We hadn't a clue why seagulls circled so low around us as we walked up from the harbour, really.



Our kid committee sat in the restaurant booth all filthy fingernails, dirty hands, scuffed clothing, disheveled hair, grimy-grinned, and wide-eyed, vulturing a shared plate of fries and Cokes all 'round. Oh, and our toes were morphing into raisins inside waterlogged shoes.

We had just emerged from the subterranean depths of Cobourg's Midtown Creek culvert and King Street storm sewer system. The portal was on Covert Street. Yes, that was our playground one summer in the late 50's.

It became a favourite hangout for two or three "gangs" of hormoneless boys. Indeed, one of our Sewer Brat members, with an entrepreneurial bent, later charged fees to other boys who wanted a tour of the system. But back to the origin of this boyish tale.

We had outgrown trikes, red wagons, shoot-em-up-cowboys, our Daniel Boone rubber bowie knives dull as newspaper editorials and Davey Crock... was just that — Disneyness for mere children.

We were ripe for unofficial anything that was outside the reach of some well-meaning adult armed to the smile with white-toothed idealism and bearing a binder of government-committee-approved activities which invariably resulted in unskinned knees and soft-soled feet. All the little trained seals who answered the call of the mild, returned home, clean-faced, to the silent applause of Parental Control Centre. "*Houston, we have no problem*".

Clean faced!! This was a crime against grime. Any boy without the honour of bearing a grass-stain skid-mark was doomed to Dorktown holding a Ward Cleaver Award of Pleasantville insignificance.

The Sewer Brats heeded only the call of the wild, something without cub scout badge merit. We were restless, not riskless. The conditions of our play had to be dirty, smelly and dangerous because we were most emphatically NOT GIRLS!

The First Amendment of the Constitution of the Democrazy Republic of Boy held for all wrong-living bad boys — **Amendment 1:** No Girls allowed. **Amendment 2:** No girls allowed. What could be more girl-free than culverts and sewers? Life was gloriously wild and free. Danger and victory went hand in hand. Defiance before compliance. We were meeting the probationary conditions for manhood.

Our initial exploration of the Midtown Creek waterway was the culvert under the Catholic School yard. It was only a block-long. We could see indirectly the light coming in from both ends. This afforded us an achievable goal with a sense of safety, a training-wheel trial. But it also encouraged us to take the bait of bigger better things — the culvert that went for blocks underneath the downtown.

On the first attempt, we entered as far as the light permitted us. Our umbilical cord to safety was stretched to the limit when darkness began to embrace us a bit too completely and we saw no light at the end of the tunnel. We didn't emerge from the womb to end in a tomb, so we backed out.

Up to the Midtown Restaurant, the kid committee held a power lunch of chips deep dipped in Heinz. All belched up on Coke, we resolved that next Saturday we would bring candles to better penetrate deeper into the dank heart of darkness — the storied light at the end of the tunnel would be ours.

The second Saturday we were well positioned to emerge at the harbour exit. Barry got the matches, Ray got the candles, a whole full box of candles, birthday cake candles. Man, we knew what we were doing. We were boys. So in we went, leaving-it-to-beaver town behind us.

We received a quick on-site tutorial that a single birthday candle provided insufficient light to guide four boys slouching towards bethlebedlam, so the solution was for each of us to

have a candle; after all, we had a “**whole full box**”.

We received another on-site tutorial about skinny little pink and blue birthday candles having a best-before-date of mere minutes of illumination for the unenlightened.

The impromptu education continued unabated when Barry, the match holder, stumbled on a pipe hidden under the water, and went down like a casualty in a bad western movie. Without seeing the light at the end of the tunnel, we turned back, lighting one candle from the other, hoping, oh man we were hoping, silent within ourselves, because we couldn't admit fear. It would be a violation of the primary policy of boyhoodlum.

Once again, over a power lunch, the Sewer Brats autopsied the misadventure and once again resolutely resolved to make it to the light at the end of the tunnel next Saturday, come heck or hell water. Multi-tasking was the disorder du jour, so in parallel simultaneity with our resolute resolving, we did the usual autopsy on the cadaver of chips bloodied with Heinz in a hygiene-free zone. Man, it was good to be a guy!

The third Saturday saw us armed with a flashlight and two tall Christmas candles, blazing red. What could stop us now? We made it all the way to stumble bumper site which compelled us to back out the previous week. It was there that the flashlight revealed to the Sewer Brats that they were not the first to enter into this Domain of Darkness — stage-right, chalk-scrawled on the wall was “BUMP”.

In a few more minutes we were to find that we were not the only ones in that culvert. Light does not bend around corners to illuminate niches and nooks. Furthermore, innocence prevented us from imagining human predators lurking in the dark. But a mouth came out of nowhere, blew out the candle, pushed us into the water and submerged our flashlight.

The sound of fleeing feet sloshing into the darkness echoed back to exacerbate our humiliation. The spears of our epithets failed to penetrate the armour of their whooping laughter. For a seeming eternity our hands brailled the wall back to Covert Street and the Midtown meet.

Who was it? Barry suggested it was the Depot Deadheads. Jim said it was the Burnham Bullies. Our name, the Sewer Brats, was at stake. The boy policy of SHOW-NO-FEAR camouflaging REAL FEAR prevailed. Next Saturday we would go full membership: five all-wet warriors.

Each of us had candles, each had matches, and two flashlights to cinch our fragile bravery. When we reached the site of the previous week's humiliation, we found the niche that had concealed the predators. It was eerily illuminated with subdued lighting emanating from above.

A round shaft fit-for-one led up to a storm sewer grill on the King Street curb outside Cortesis' Billiard Academy. Once in a while someone stepped over the grill to jay-walk. Oh, what could be more fun than needlessly exciting idiot adults by hollering up the shaft.

**HELP! HELP! I'M BEING HELD HOSTAGE BY BOOGER BULLIES OF BURNHAM STREET!
SAVE ME! PLEASE, SAVE ME FROM SCHOOL RETENTION!**

Sadly no one took notice. Our mischief evaporated into a mild cuss. We were shafted.

So on we slouched and sloshed, around a slight bend and behold, there it was: the light at the end of the tunnel we had been striving so tenaciously to reach. We arrived at our goal, stepped out of the creek and scaled a 20-foot mountain of coal to shout our victory against the forces of darkness.

Off we paraded to the Midtown Restaurant to formally dissolve the Sewer Brats Club. Well-anointed in Scent of Sewage, we looked to the heavens and, in our freshly-minting minds, we saw that our achievement had earned us an entourage of circling seagulls. It was great day to be a boy.

This story is reprinted by permission from Wally's book, Cobourg is My Poem Town which is available at Let's Talk Books at 25 King Street East, Cobourg, (289) 252-2214.

Member Matters

New Members

Please join me in welcoming two new families as CDHS members:

- Peter and Virginia McLaughlin
- David and Mary Jane Broughton

Announcements

Hastings County Historical Society

The Hastings County Historical Society has many resources available on their website including their monthly newsletter: <https://www.cabhc.ca/en/index.aspx>

The Hastings County Historical Society & Belleville Public Library present

Hastings County Road Trips - In Search of Historic Plaques

The back roads of Hastings County are sprinkled with historic sites, if only you knew how to find them.

Fortunately, the Hastings County Historical Society has created an online map to show you the way.

Orland French, the Society's "historic sites man", will take you on an illustrated virtual tour deep into Hastings County in search of historic plaques.

Join us for this free Zoom presentation.

Tuesday, June 29 at 3:00 p.m.

Register for this free event at bellevillelibrary.ca
Or call (613) 968-6731 x 2049



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