



Stratford-Perth County Branch

First Plaque 2012



100th Plaque 2013

More Than Bricks and Mortar

December 2013

Nostalgic Remembrances of the Holiday Season as Children of "The Shops"

By Patricia Shewen and Marguerite Brant

In the early 1950's the CNRA had quite a presence in Stratford. Like the fathers of most of our friends and schoolmates, our Dad worked there, as did our grandfather before his retirement. The shop whistle marked the passing of the day. When we lived on Wellington Street Dad walked home for dinner just after the noon whistle and returned before it blew again at one.

The local CNRA (Canadian National Recreation Association), which was a major presence in the city, sponsored many local arts groups and sports teams and made certain there was no shortage of activities for employees and families.

Christmas celebrations were especially memorable. A stage would be erected at one end of the shop floor where a variety of performers from musicians to magicians entertained. Many families did not yet have TV and those that did had access to only two channels, thus the spectacles before us were particularly wonderful. There was always a brightly lit tree, displayed against the backdrop of machinery, and often a huge locomotive suspended from the ceiling just out of bounds, a sight that inspired wonder equal to most of the magical tricks.

Of course Christmas carols were sung and Santa appeared with small gifts and treats for all the youngsters.

While our parents celebrated New Year's Eve with friends, we kids, (Pat, Bill and Peg) were treated to our own celebration with our grandparents. We were allowed to stay up and greet the New Year, often waiting on the side porch to hear the shop whistle which, on that day only, blew loud and clear at midnight!

While we know now that all was not as positive as it seemed, and that the railway as the centre of activity for Stratford was nearing its end, our memories remain cherished reminders of that time. To this day the scent of machine oil evokes thoughts of our happy times as children of the shops.

The authors are the daughters of Allan A. Pletsch, machinist and supervisor, and granddaughters of William H. Pletsch, boilermaker



The whistle at its new home in the Stratford-Perth Museum

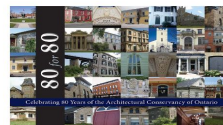
New ACO Book Celebrates 80 Years

The ACO is marking its 80th anniversary with the publication of the book, *80 for 80: Celebrating Eighty Years of the Architectural Conservancy of Ontario*. The handsomely illustrated book profiles eighty among the hundreds of buildings and structures across Ontario that ACO has had a hand in saving since it rescued one building, the Barnum House near Grafton, in 1933.

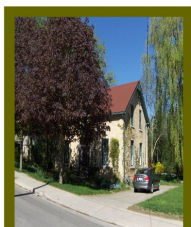
The book portrays the many creative ways that ACO's branches and volunteers have found to rescue historic places at risk and build the case for heritage preservation in communities across the province.

The book will cost \$30 plus shipping and you can pre-order it at www.arconserv.ca.

It will be mailed out just in time for the holidays, making the perfect gift for the history or heritage lover on your list. You can also preorder it through our branch website for delivery early 2014.



NEWS FLASH: The Branch website is now online. Check it out at: www.stratford-perthcountybranchaco.ca





Feature House

The Ontario Cottage at 275 Albert Street

The Ontario Cottage at 275 Albert Street, owned by ACO member David Harvie, was built in 1890 by Thomas Gallagher for his son Michael and his new bride.

Born in 1867, twenty-two-year-old Michael Gallagher married eighteen-year-old Maria Donohue in Sarnia. She was the daughter of James Donohue and Maria Samson of Pori Edward, Ontario which was the Canadian terminus for the Grand Trunk Railway.

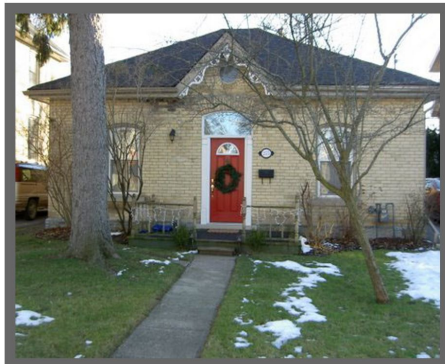
Young, strong and quick, Michael worked as a brakeman, which, at the time, was the most dangerous job on the railway or in any industry of the day.

In the yard, the brakemen would stand atop a rail car and via a series of hand signals direct the shunting and coupling of the cars. Once underway, the brakeman would respond to prescribed signals sent by the engineer through pulls on the train's steam whistle. He would climb to the top of moving rail cars and turn the brake wheel to speed up or slow down the train, often jumping from car to car to accomplish this task regardless of snow, sleet, rain or high winds as the train wound its way around curves, uphill and down.

Needless to say the mortality rate and degree of serious, debilitating injury and loss of limbs was inordinately high. At the time, the railways took the position that safety on the job was the employee's responsibility. Consequently, the death or incapacity of a breadwinner often left families of brakemen in dire straits, dependent on family or charity because there was little or no company support or government programs.

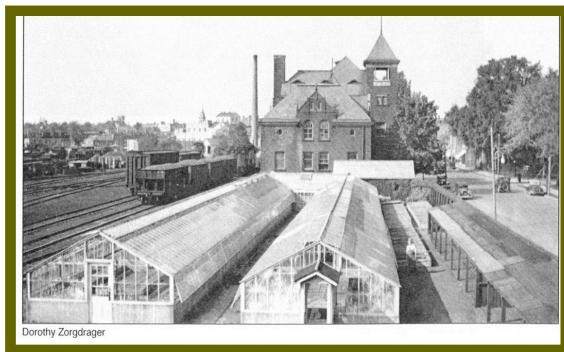
Fortunately, Michael survived and with the digging of a railway tunnel under the St Clair River at Sarnia, Port Edward lost its importance and he was transferred to Stratford where he was later promoted to the position of conductor.

Michael and Maria had six children who were born in the house at 275 Albert Street. With the opening of the Canadian West, like many railroaders in Stratford, the family moved to Saskatchewan around 1905 where four more children were born. By 1916 their eldest son, Francis, was also farming in Saskatchewan.



The Railroad Greenhouses of Stratford

By Dean Robinson



Dorothy Zorndrager

It's hard to imagine the ability to grow geraniums and cannas as a requisite for employment with the Grand Trunk Railway. But early in the 1920s, in Stratford, horticultural aptitude was just the ticket for Alfred Williams, who had grown up on the Cornish coast in southwest England.

At the age of 16, not far from Polperro, where he had been born and raised, Williams became a helper on an estate that employed 14 gardeners. A decade later, he moved to another estate where he was the head gardener for four years.

In 1911, at age 30, he immigrated to Canada, where he settled in Stratford and worked for about seven years in the Guthrie greenhouses at 18 Victoria St. From there, he could see and hear the daily bustle of the GTR's newly enlarged, state-of-the-art motive power repair shops.

In July 1918, the railway returned John C. Garden to Stratford, where in 1883 he had graduated from the GTR's apprenticeship program. In the intervening years, as he worked his way up the master mechanics ladder, his stops had included Niagara Falls, Montreal and Battle Creek, Michigan.

During a visit to Florida, Garden had seen white mute swans gliding majestically on some of that state's inland lakes. They intrigued him to the extent he bought a pair and had them shipped to Battle Creek, where he donated them to the city. In time their numbers multiplied.

After his transfer to Stratford as head of the repair shops, Garden arranged for two of the Battle Creek swans to follow him. And so began Stratford's storied association with swans on the Avon River.

Garden's interest in the enhancement of parks was not limited to swans. So he was properly positioned when the GTR decided to establish a greenhouse operation in Stratford. The railway was bent on beautifying its station and shop properties, and to do that system-wide, the creation of company-operated greenhouses made sense.

Looking north, the two 300-foot greenhouses stretch north toward the YMCA and the city centre.

Since 1913, the GTR's Stratford division had been overseeing rail lines from Weston to Sarnia, London to Stratford, Elmira to Galt, Harriston to Palmerston, and Stratford to Owen Sound, Southampton, Kincardine, Wiarton and Durham. Along those lines was quite a collection of stations, most of them bounded by what came to be called "station parks."

Garden wholeheartedly supported the idea of a railway greenhouse in Stratford, but it was under the direction of his successor, John Roberts, that the first phase of the greenhouse was built in 1922. It was positioned along the Downie Street boundary of the shops' property, just inside the fence that ran between the YMCA and the building that housed the shops' offices, the apprenticeship classroom and the assembly hall.

To ensure the railway had someone to run the place, it hired Alf Williams, who worked in the shops as a boiler-maker's helper about a year before the greenhouse was operational. Williams was not long naming Fred C. Ward, also a British immigrant as his assistant.

Soon there developed an annual routine, which began early in the spring with the railway's landscape artist, Samuel G. Skinner, travelling throughout the division's catchment area to estimate the number of plants required by each station for its window boxes, planters and flower beds. It was then up to Williams and Ward to satisfy those requirements. Their place of work was a well-equipped 300 foot greenhouse whose steam heat came through a line from the shop's powerhouse.



Head gardener Alf Williams inspects seed beds in the greenhouse he ran for 21 years

In 1923 the Canadian National Railways absorbed the GTR, and one of the changes that followed in Stratford was the addition of a second 300-foot greenhouse, parallel to the original facility.

The operation's output grew to about 80,000 plants a year, some of them bound for CNR properties as far north as North Bay, as far south and west as Windsor, and as far east as Malton and Niagara.

At shipping time, Williams and Ward were assisted by two or three helpers. In assembly-line fashion, they wrapped the plants in strips of dampened newspaper and put them in clearly marked boxes. Then, based on the proposed delivery route, they loaded the boxes into a baggage car furnished by the railway. On occasion, Williams was dispatched in mid-season to see how his plants were faring at their new addresses. Each station paid for the plants it received, which helped to offset the greenhouse costs.

The Stratford station and Station Park, directly to its west, were a good example of the railway's beautification program. There were no tennis courts in the park in the early years, but even after their construction, the land continued to be adorned with flower beds, trees, shrubs and pathways. Its upkeep was shared by city and railway employees.

When the call for the conservation of manpower and resources came during the Second World War, the Stratford greenhouses were dismantled and sold to a Hamilton company. In 1943 Williams was named an assistant foreman in the yards and Ward became a machinist helper.

Williams retired in 1946 at age 65. He died in November 1958. Ward was still working for the CNR when he suddenly took ill and died in March 1958. He was buried on what would have been his 60th birthday.

*Author and ACO member, Dean Robinson has written several books about Stratford and area. His most recent is **Railway Stratford Revisited**, which was launched in 2012. It is available at Fanfare Books.*

*The photos in the article appear in **Railway Stratford Revisited** and are reproduced here courtesy of Dean Robinson and Dorothy Zоргdrager.*



Six months after the greenhouse was operational, Alf Williams chose this man, Fred Ward, to be his assistant



2013 HIGHLIGHTS

January... 59th historical plaque application received

February... part of the Heritage and Collectors show at the Rotary Complex

March... work began with Creativeink Design Group to develop the branch website supported by a 2012 Grant received from the Orr Family Fund, Stratford and Perth County Community Foundation

April... 65th historical plaque application received

May 6th... Annual General Meeting featuring 'Life along the Avon River in 1913', a narrated tour by Carole and Rick Huband marking the 100th anniversary of Stratford's vote to save the Avon River parkland

June 8th... a successful garage sale raising just over \$800 for branch projects

July... work began on the first branch newsletter *More Than Bricks and Mortar*, Margaret Murray-Nicholson taking on the role of editor

August... 89th historical plaque application received

September... first edition of *More Than Bricks and Mortar*

September 29th... sponsored the Cobourg Street Stroll as part of Stratford's Culture Days featuring a self-guided tour of Cobourg Street and tour of five Open Houses.. 66 people toured the homes!

October 26th... sponsored a Workshop about the Building Stories website (www.buildingstories.co) led by the Heritage Resources Centre, University of Waterloo

October 28th... presentation by President Ted Hales to Stratford City Council of the branch's response to the recent Malone Givens Parsons Ltd. Cooper Site Assessment Report

November... 100th application received... and branch website ready to launch!!

Stratford-Perth County Branch ACO Executive:

President: Ted Hales

Vice Presidents: Sandra Huntley & Ann Reynolds

Treasurer: Dianne Chisholm

Secretary: Margaret Murray-Nicholson

Membership Chair: Barbara Dyson

Historical Plaque Co-Chairs: Carole & Rick Huband

Members-at-Large: Mary Lou Middleton
Dan Schneider

Webmaster: David Harvie

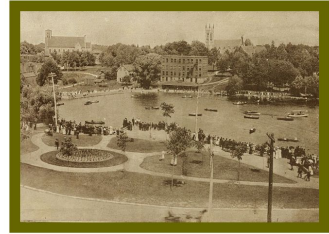
Newsletter Editorial Board:

Ted Hales Carole Huband Rick Huband, Margaret Murray-Nicholson (Editor)

Branch members or other readers are encouraged to suggest content or style ideas for future issues.

Email: ACOStratfordPerth@arconserv.ca

1904-1913



2013

1904: Stratford's first Parks Board was created and well known park architects were consulted for their advice and direction.

The CPR also wanted the riverside properties to build a rail line that would help it compete with the Grand Trunk Railway.

1913: The quest for the use of the parkland that is now such an integral part of our city went on for nine years until the citizens won the day .

2013: One hundred years later the city erected a plaque to commemorate the victory of our predecessors and the treasured parkland along the river secured for future generations.

The Building Stories podcast series features an interview about the Branch's **Historical Plaque Program**. To listen, go to www.stratford-perthcountybranchaco.ca or www.buildingstories.co

Trafalgar Bridge Threatened



The Branch recently proposed a plaque for the historic Trafalgar Bridge, which crosses the Thames River north of St. Marys. Constructed in 1905 and likely the oldest bridge on the North Thames, the bridge is a rare surviving example of a pin-connected steel truss bridge.

Unfortunately the bridge, which is owned jointly by the Townships of West Perth and Perth South, is now threatened with destruction. In October Perth South Council narrowly voted to spare the bridge on a 3-3 vote; however, West Perth voted to close and remove the bridge. These decisions leave the future of the bridge in limbo. Should the townships agree to remove the bridge they would have to undertake an environmental assessment process, which will require public consultation. The Branch is closely monitoring the situation.



Historical photographs courtesy of Stratford-Perth Archives
The whistle: Stratford-Perth Museum Houses: Carole Huband
Bridge: Dan Schneider