

STRATFORD/PERTH COUNTY

The GTR Shops are now on the Top Ten Endangered Places List see p3



More Than Bricks and Mortar

Issue # 4, September 2014

Family Ties – The CNR Shops & The Stratford Festival

By Nora Polley

In March of 1913, the citizens of Stratford made a momentous decision that would impact the area for generations to come. They voted to preserve our fledgling park system rather than allow the Canadian Pacific Railway to build a 15 foot embankment for a rail line adjacent to the Avon River and Lake Victoria. The 100th anniversary of that moment in the city's history was marked last March 10 by the placement of a Parks Board plaque near the Cenotaph. The Beacon-Herald published the following. "This is about the citizens and the 1,044 people that stood up and took notice and voted against the CPR and voted for the future." said parks board chair Rick Orr at the ceremony. His great-grandfather R. Thomas Orr lead the fight to preserve the city's waterfront park system.

My maternal grandfather Frederick George McTavish was a local merchant. He ran The F.G. McTavish Arcade Dry Goods Store on Downie Street. He was in favour of the CPR proposal and the workers and jobs it would bring to the city. He was not alone in his thinking. Then he had a chat with Mr. Orr. Orr and his followers waged a grass roots campaign against the railway. They buttonholed people in the streets and shops. They went door-to-door spreading their message of ecological responsibility in a time long before "green" was fashionable. In the end, my grandfather was among the 1,044 who defeated the railway proposal. The land on which the Stratford Festival would be built was saved for future glory.

My paternal grandfather Francis Patrick Polley worked as a machinist in the CNR shops for 35 years but music was his real passion. He conducted the CNRA Men's Chorus as well as a number of other local choirs. During the depression my grandfather was going to be laid off. He was married with 2 children. The story goes that a young man without family named Robertson took the lay off so my grandpa could keep his job. My father, Victor Polley, who worked for 17 years with the Stratford Festival (1954-1971) spoke with Mr. Robertson's widow at his funeral and thanked her on behalf of our family.

Another story involves my grandfather McTavish. His family, my grandparents Gertrude Agnes (Pearn) and Frederick George, my mother Gertrude Elizabeth and my aunt Catherine Dorothy, lived at Avon Brae at 45 James Street. It is now The Alexandra at 300 William Street, a huge home with several acres of land. They kept horses, chickens and a cow. During the depression, my grandpa McTavish tried to sell a parcel of land to cover his debts. A local doctor was looking to build a new home. If he bought a lot, it would be the answer to my grandpa's prayers. Unfortunately Dr. Kenner decided to build on St. David Street and Avon Brae was lost. Later in its history, the house would be the site for the Festival's opening garden party.



My grandfather, Francis Patrick Polley (centre) with six of the men who sang in Richard III the first year of the Festival The program lists in alphabetical order: Grant Ellison, Ross Heimpel, ErnestHouse, George Leinweber, Robert Moorehead and Glenn Richards

Photo from the Beacon Herald

When the Stratford Festival was founded in 1953, the CNR Band provided most of the musicians who played in the preshow fanfares and the loft orchestra. Grandpa Polley's men's and boys' choirs sang onstage for the coronation of Richard III in the Festival's inaugural season. On opening night before the 8:15 curtain time, all the church bells in the city rang from 8:00pm to 8:05pm. Then all the factory whistles (including the one at the CNR shops) blew from 8:05pm to 8:10 and at 8:10 there was an air fly-over. The fanfares sounded and the cannon roared.

When I was a child we played outside on the warm summer evenings. My generation knew to go in when the Festival's cannon sounded. The previous generation had listened for the CNR whistle to signal bedtime. The cannon still sounds before each performance at the Festival Theatre. It is much quieter than in my day and children don't play outdoors much anymore.

I visited the home of Mr. Albert Herman who in his teens started working as an apprentice in the shops in the 1940's. Young men were allowed to quit school early to fill the jobs of those who were fighting overseas. Mr. Herman remembers being asked by his supervisor to build a prototype sword for the Festival's production of Julius Caesar in 1954. He kept the original blade and fashioned a hilt for it.

It is mounted on a wooden plaque with the inscription
 "TEST BLADE #1 FORGED CNR SHOPS FOR FESTIVAL PLAY.
 ROMAN SWORD GLADIUS HISPANIENSIS
 BLADE AND HANDLE FINISHED BY AB. HERMAN."

He graciously sat for the photo printed here and donated the piece to the Stratford Festival Archives.

Photo by Nora Polley



There could not be a closer tie between the CNR shops and the Stratford Festival. This overlap between the Festival and the shops would continue for more than a decade.

When the shops finally closed in 1964, the Festival had replaced them as the driving force of the city's economy. The preservation and rejuvenation of the historic buildings on the Cooper site can only enhance the reputation of the city and its citizens. We owe it to our forefathers to tell their stories.

If you want to know more about the Festival and/or the shops, I can recommend A Star Danced (the story of how Stratford started the Stratford Festival) by Barbara Reid and Thelma Morrison and Dean Robinson's book Railway Stratford.

.Nora Polley works in the Stratford Festival Archives

Feature Houses

The first residents of each of these houses were employees of the GTR Shops

297 Erie Street



Built 1907

A.E. Etherington

Machinist

Alfred Ernest Etherington was born in Stratford in 1877. His father and three uncles had emigrated from England to Stratford to work for the Grand Trunk Railway where his father was employed as a brass finisher in the shops. In 1891, fourteen year old Ernest was a student at Central Business College and by nineteen, he was employed as a fitter with the GTR. Four years later, he would be qualified as a machinist. In 1901 Ernest married Annie Jolly. The couple built the house at 297 Erie Street in 1907 where they raised two sons and lived the rest of their lives. That same year saw a major expansion of the GTR shops. The steel structure was completed in February, 1909. A grand banquet was held in city hall to celebrate the day with Charles Melville Hays, vice-president and general manager of the Grand Trunk Railway, on hand. Mayor W.S. Dingman addressed the assembled guests, praising the shops and the workers who comprised almost half of the city work force.

67 Caledonia Street

Built 1902

George Kennedy

Boilermaker

George Kennedy was born in Ayrshire Scotland in the mid-1840's. By the time he chose to emigrate from Scotland, in 1888, he had learned a trade as a boilermaker.

He married Esther Coffey in Kingston in 1889 and brought his bride to Stratford where he was already employed by the Grand Trunk Railway shops. They moved into the newly built house at 67 Caledonia Street in 1902. It would become home for their four daughters.

The establishment of the Grand Trunk repair shops in the 1870's brought a huge and continuing influx of skilled craftsmen from abroad and other parts of this young country to Stratford. Among them were boilermakers like George Kennedy, originally needed in the Great Lakes region for steam powered ships but then becoming essential for the building and maintenance of steam locomotives. By the 1950's diesel technology was replacing steam and a new era was born.



Important Announcement- GTR Shops on Ten Top Endangered Places List

The **Top Ten Endangered Places List** is released annually to bring national attention to sites at risk due to neglect, lack of funding, inappropriate development and weak legislation. The list has become a powerful tool in the fight to make landmarks, not landfill. Heritage Canada The National Trust(HCNT) uses three primary criteria to determine the 10 final sites. (continued on page 4).

Top Ten Endangered Places List (continued)

The following is the criteria used to include the former Grand Trunk Railways Locomotive Repair Shops on the list for 2014:

"Why it Matters

Built in 1907-09, Stratford, Ontario's GTR (later CNR) locomotive repair shops building is a massive steel and concrete facility that is an excellent example of its kind in Canada.

A prominent structure adjacent to Stratford's downtown, the vacant two-storey building covers close to five of the original 11.4 acres of railway lands, acquired by the city in 2009.

An extraordinary industrial site and important cultural asset, it offers a range of development opportunities.

And at close to 16,800 square metres it would be an environmental travesty to send it all to landfill."

With the addition that was added in the 1940s, it became the largest CNR repair shop in Canada, thus adding to its national significance.

President's Message

This summer has been a busy one for your executive who in co-operation with other heritage groups mounted a campaign to convince Stratford City Hall to retain and rehabilitate the former GTR Shops. This was in response to suggestions from City Hall that the Shops be demolished and the decision by Council to eliminate the requirement for any public consultation on the future redevelopment of the Cooper site. Our objective is to build public support for the retention of the Shops by changing public perception of the structure as a derelict relic of our past, which should be torn down. Rather to encourage citizens to imagine alternative uses for the Shops as a cornerstone to the redevelopment of the Cooper site, thus the theme of our campaign "Be Open to the Possibilities."

In addition, we want to counteract the argument that the city can't afford to redevelop the Shops, which is used by some as an excuse for inaction or demolition. Rather we argue that the private sector be invited to propose and, hopefully, finance new uses for the Shops and site within an overall vision for the economic revitalization of our downtown core.

We have supported the Stratford Perth Heritage Foundation's successful bid to have Heritage Stratford review and report on the significant heritage aspects of the Shops. Our Branch was instrumental in getting the Shops placed on Heritage Canada the National Trust's 2014 list of the Top Ten Most Endangered Places; receiving support for retention of the Shops from the Stratford & District Labour Council and from citizens like Nora Polley who wrote the feature article for this newsletter. We are also sponsoring the public meeting at the Queen's Inn on September 8th and will survey all candidates for city council to provide them with an opportunity to express an opinion on the Shops, which we will make public before the municipal election.

Rick Huband

President, Stratford/Perth County Branch ACO

Cobourg Street Stroll-Sept 28,2014

As part of Culture Days in Stratford the Branch is offering another look at houses on Cobourg Street featuring our Historic Plaques. Check the Branch website, www.stratford-perthcountybranchaco.ca for further details.

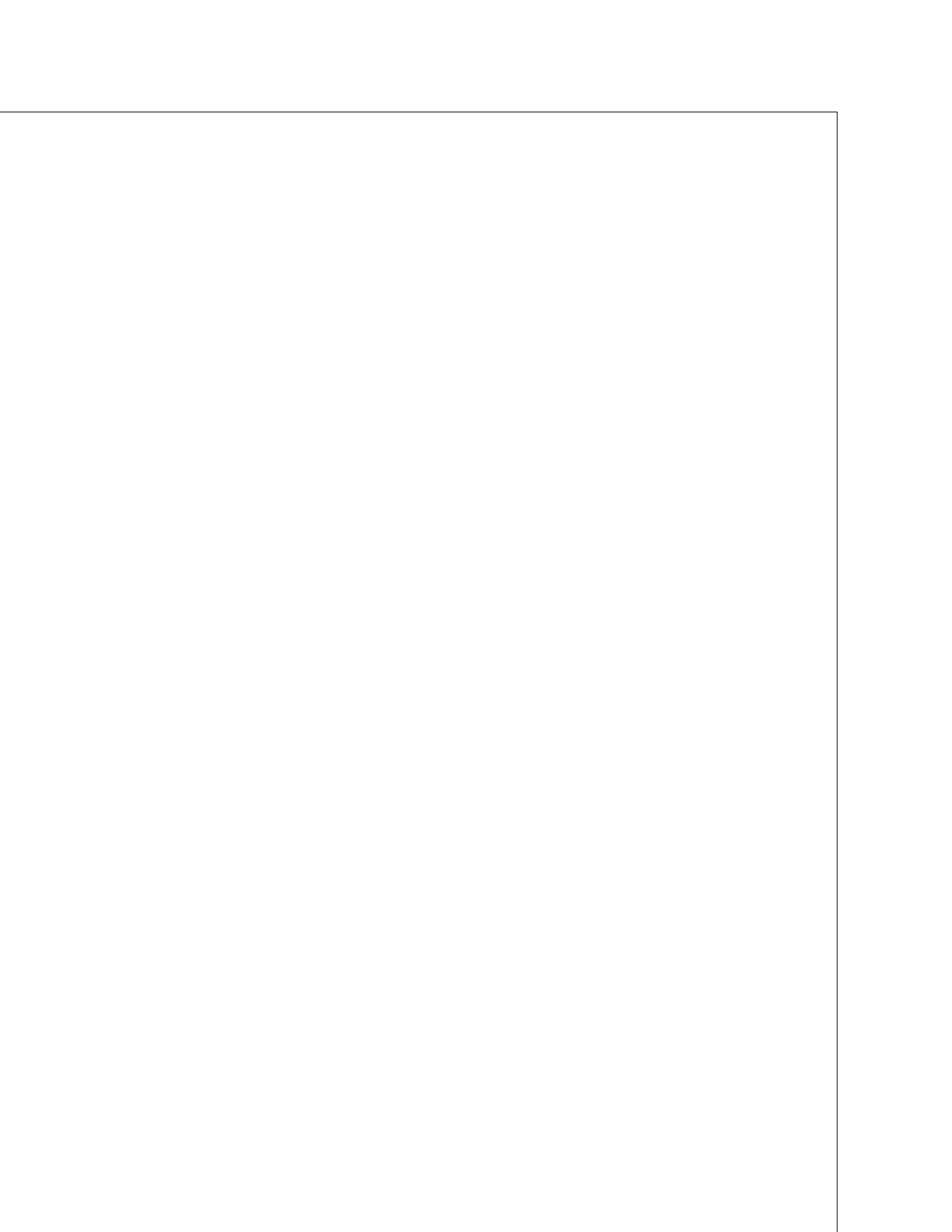
Historic Plaque Update

132 plaques have been issued and requests continue. As well as in Stratford, plaques are displayed on 2 rural houses and 1 in St Marys.

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

Newsletter Editorial Board:

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



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