

STRATFORD/PERTH COUNTY



Women of the Shops 1944

# More Than Bricks and Mortar

Issue # 5, Winter 2015

## Campaign to Save GTR Locomotive Repair Shops

By Rick Huband and Dean Robinson

*This is the story of our campaign to save the former Grand Trunk Railway (GTR) shops. At this writing, the next chapter of the shops' history has yet to unfold.*

For more than a century, beginning in the mid-1850s, Stratford was a railway centre, first for the Grand Trunk, then for Canadian National. In addition to being a regional headquarters for both railways, the city was also home to their locomotive repair facilities, which were set on a 19-acre site in the centre of town. In the boom years of steam power, the Stratford shops employed as much as 40 per cent of the city's workforce.

The buildings grew in piecemeal fashion until the early 1900s, when a mammoth structure was erected. When that building was enlarged in the late 1940s, Stratford became the largest repair operation in the entire CNR system.



Photo-Dean Robinson



Photo- Carole Huband

Locally, the railway operation was the heartbeat of the city. Through the years, it led to the creation of Stratford's first library, and construction of its first YMCA and floodlit baseball stadium. Members of its concert choir and band were the inaugural choristers and musicians of the Stratford Shakespearean Festival.

But as CN swung its attention to diesel power, it elected to shut down its Stratford works. Cooper-Bessemer, a U.S. firm, leased the buildings and site for several years but eventually moved production back to Ohio. Since then the property has come to be known as the Cooper site. As such, it has endured ownership changes, failed development dreams, a major fire and court battles.

Since 2009 the site has again been city owned. But regardless of ownership, for almost three decades the massive cathedral-like shops building, encompassing 185,000 square feet, has been left to the effects of climate and neglect. For most residents, the derelict state of the building has led to growing frustration and a desire to tear it down.

A number of heritage groups, principally the GTR Heritage Site Committee, (GTRHSC) have advocated since 2010 to save at least part of the shops in commemoration of Stratford's railway history. The GTRHSC members concede they made little progress with the City.

In January 2014, the city administrator recommended demolishing the shops. In May 2014, the council amended its official plan to eliminate the requirement for public discussion on the future of the Cooper site and the shops. Those two events spurred heritage groups to launch another campaign to save the shops.

The GTRHSC pressed Heritage Stratford to conduct an on-site evaluation of the shops. The results of that evaluation confirmed the site is worthy of heritage designation. Armed with that document, two determined female members of the committee overcame all opposition and the committee recommended that city council designate the shops under the Ontario Heritage Act. The council's decision is pending.



Photo-Carole Huband

At the same time, our branch decided to become more involved in the campaign. Through strategic use of local media we tried to build public support and pressure city councillors around three basic goals.

First, we encouraged the public to look beyond the current derelict state of the shops and to imagine the possibility of turning an important relic of our railway past into a cornerstone of the economic revitalization of our downtown core. To that end, branch members developed a post card with the slogan “Be Open to the Possibilities,” which was distributed throughout the city and became the theme of our campaign.

Second, we hoped to build support for retention of the shops. With the help of local and provincial ACO members, we were able to convince The National Trust to place the GTR shops on its 2014 Ten Most Endangered Places List. The shops joined other places of significance across Canada, thus raising their importance beyond a purely local site to one of national interest.

We also wanted to provide an opportunity for residents who had been silent through the long controversial history of the shops to give voice to their support. For example, following a presentation to the Stratford and District Labour Council by branch members, the council passed a motion which said, in part, “. . . That building formed the basis of all that was and is our wonderful city and should not be destroyed.”

As well, we developed a close relationship with the course director of the third-year urban planning faculty at the University of Waterloo, who assigned his students the task of developing a vision for the shops and overall railway site. At a charrette in October, more than 50 Stratford residents spent a day with 11 teams of students discussing ideas and concepts for the development of the site. The students returned to Stratford in December to present the results of their work to residents at a well-attended Open House.

Third, we wanted to offer a reasoned response to the city's use of “no money” as its longstanding excuse for doing nothing. We suggested exploring development and financing opportunities with the private sector.

To this end, in September we sponsored a panel discussion, attended by about 100 residents. The panelists included a developer whose firm is undertaking a major urban renewal project of a historic, industrial property on the Ottawa River, within site of the Parliament buildings. We wanted to bring a private-sector perspective to the discussion of development opportunities for the Cooper site.

On the night of our panel discussion, council approved a memorandum of understanding with Riversedge Developments to submit a development proposal to the City. A key element of the Riversedge's proposal is that the GTR shops are to be retained and rehabilitated while respecting the heritage nature of the building. It is proposed that the use of the shops will evolve over time with the help of community input. The shops will become a focal point for mixed use development which will enhance the existing cultural aspects of the site including the university, YMCA and may become an important venue for public events. It is proposed that the development of the site will be complimentary to and provide a strong new urban connection to the downtown.

We take comfort that our efforts may have had some influence in changing the conversation in our community. However, the story has yet to conclude and, at this writing, is subject to a final deal with the City.

**Rick Huband** is President of the Stratford/Perth County Branch of the ACO

**Dean Robinson** is a Stratford historian and author. His books include *Railway Stratford* and *Railway Stratford Revisited*, both of which document the city's 100-plus years, as a national railway centre. He is also a member of ACO.

## Stratford to be nominated for NARHF

By Dan Schneider

The Stratford/Perth County ACO will be nominating the city of Stratford for induction into the North America Railway Hall of Fame (NARHF). The nomination will make the case that Stratford is nationally significant for its compelling railway history and heritage. A critical part of this heritage is the surviving Grand Trunk Railway 'Shops.'

Housed in the historic Canada Southern Railway Station in St. Thomas, the Hall of Fame was founded in 1996. Its purpose is to recognize significant contributions or achievements relating to the railway industry in North America and to educate the public about the impact of railway transportation on the history and development of communities, nations and international relations throughout North America.

Inductions into NARHF take place at ceremonies held in St. Thomas every two years. The nominees are judged as to whether they are significant on a local, national, or North American level. A panel of experts make the final selections. Inductees into the Hall of Fame can take the form of communities, people, events, art forms, equipment, facilities or structures.



In 2012 the Town of St. Marys was inducted into the Hall of Fame in recognition of its leadership in repurposing the 1858 Sarnia Bridge across the Thames River. The former railway viaduct is now part of St. Marys' recreational Grand Trunk Trail and affords stunning views of the town and river valley.

Last year the Town of Halton Hills was inducted for its remarkable railway heritage.

ACO's nomination of Stratford will be completed by the end of the year. If successful, Stratford will be inducted into the Hall of

Photo- Dan Schneider  
Fame in June 2016.

## University of Waterloo GTR Shops Project

By Carole Huband

On September 8, Professor John Lewis from the University of Waterloo School of Planning took part in the ACO panel discussion 'Be Open to the Possibilities.' Professor Lewis and his students, who were working on a senior course assignment to adaptively reuse the GTR shops and Cooper Site, were well received by the audience. 'Often we engage our students to look to European examples, but we have a tremendous example of a heritage site right in our own backyard,' he said.

Professor Lewis, his students and ACO developed an enjoyable relationship for the next three months.

To help prepare the students for their assignment, Dean Robinson, with the help of a number of volunteers, took the students on a guided tour of the site to introduce them to the physical and historic importance of the GTR shops to Stratford.

Professor Lewis organized a charrette, planning session, at the UW Stratford Campus on October 5 which about 100, including students and townspeople attended. The event was well publicized by the Beacon Herald and CTV Kitchener. The candidates for mayor and council were represented and many praised the process and the student plans at the all candidates' debate a few days later.

Photo-Thor Dingman

A month later, ACO members Thor Dingman and Dean Robinson and GTRHSC member Allan Waddingham were invited to the University of Waterloo to help judge the final eleven presentations by the students. Four winners and 2 runners-up were chosen to be presented in Stratford. On Thursday December 11, John Lewis and his urban planning students showed their designs for the GTR Shops/Cooper Site in the atria of the UW Stratford Campus. They were as the Stratford Beacon Herald described 'polished, poised and professional.'

Over 60 residents, including 5 city councillors and Stratford's CAO attended the event organized by Stratford/Perth County ACO and the university. The designs included spaces for residents to work and live as well as recreational areas for the whole city. Some designs included a new transit hub to replace the one behind City Hall when the new Market Square is completed.

Those who attended were enthusiastic to see some creative ideas for the site and a number added their own well thought out suggestions.



Photo- Thor Dingman

## President's Message

The next sixteen months will be a busy one for our Branch. We have been requested by the provincial office of ACO and Community Heritage Ontario, to take the lead in planning, organizing and managing the annual Ontario Heritage Conference, which will be held in Stratford/Perth in 2016 during the month of May. The dates will be finalized within the next week.

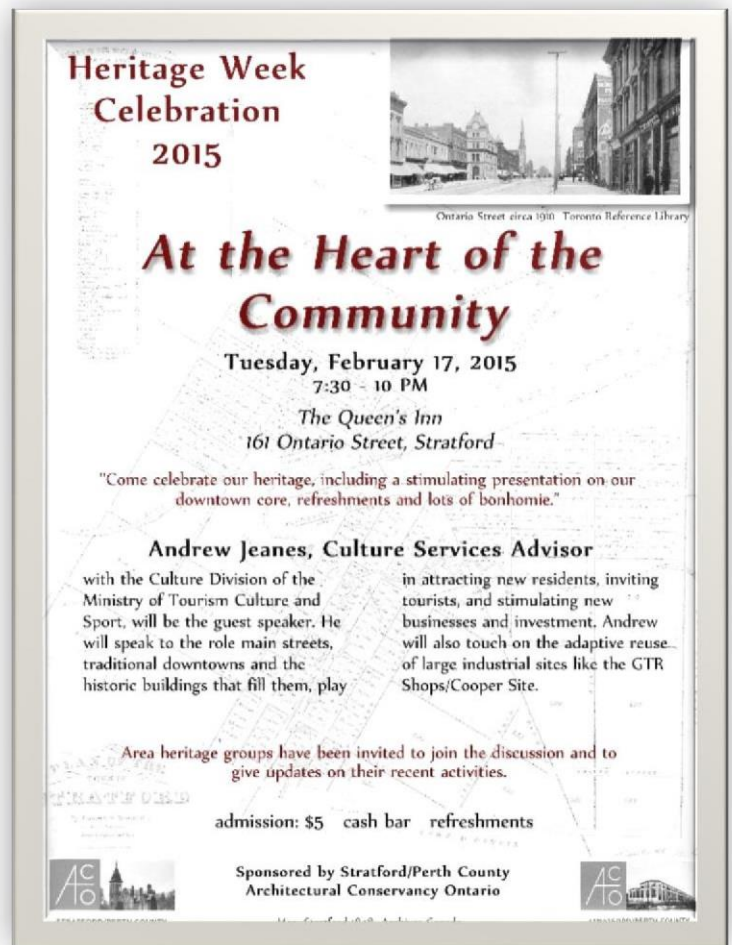
The conference usually attracts 225-250 delegates from across the province, Canada and beyond. Delegate's background and experience range from professionals who teach or work in the heritage field to magnificent amateurs, such as our branch members, who have an abiding interest in preserving our heritage buildings and telling stories about our history through outreach initiatives such as our Historic Plaque Program, Speakers Program and the development of self-guided walking tours of our neighbourhoods.

We are looking for volunteers with a wide array of experience and enthusiasm to help make the conference a success and to make delegates' visit to Stratford/Perth a memorable one.

The scope of our task will include, but is not limited to, defining the conference theme and program, attracting top notch speakers and panelists, securing conference venues, negotiating accommodation packages and working with the Festival, restaurants, pubs and other tourist operators to provide afterhours social and entertainment events, media and communications as well as fundraising and sponsorships to help underwrite some of our costs.

Should you be interested in helping out with Conference 2016 please don't hesitate to contact me [at rshuband@rogers.com](mailto:rshuband@rogers.com)

Rick Huband  
President, Stratford/Perth County ACO



**Heritage Week Celebration 2015**

**At the Heart of the Community**

Tuesday, February 17, 2015  
7:30 - 10 PM  
The Queen's Inn  
161 Ontario Street, Stratford

"Come celebrate our heritage, including a stimulating presentation on our downtown core, refreshments and lots of bonhomie."

**Andrew Jeanes, Culture Services Advisor**

with the Culture Division of the Ministry of Tourism Culture and Sport, will be the guest speaker. He will speak to the role main streets, traditional downtowns and the historic buildings that fill them, play in attracting new residents, inviting tourists, and stimulating new businesses and investment. Andrew will also touch on the adaptive reuse of large industrial sites like the GTR Shops/Cooper Site.

Area heritage groups have been invited to join the discussion and to give updates on their recent activities.

admission: \$5 cash bar refreshments

Sponsored by Stratford/Perth County Architectural Conservancy Ontario



## Historic Plaque Program On Hold

The Branch is not accepting applications for this popular Program due to the temporary closing of the Stratford Perth Archives. Access to the records and information held by the Archives is essential to do the research required to prepare the historical data provided with the plaque information.

## Heritage Weekend in Stratford

June 6-7, 2015

June 6 **Doors Open**

70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the end of WW 2

June / *"Just Around the Block"*

*Join the Stratford/Perth County ACO for a guided walk around Queen Street, Ballantyne Avenue, Front and Water Streets*

*Check Branch website for details.*

[www.stratford-perthcountybranchaco.ca](http://www.stratford-perthcountybranchaco.ca)