

Heritage Corner

Oh, how times have changed in Corunna!

For present-day Corunna residents, it's difficult to visualize the Corunna of a century ago. Even residents born and raised in the town will not remember it as it was in February, 1879. But thanks to vintage Sarnia Observer files transcribed and submitted to Heritage Corner by Allan Anderson of the Heritage St. Clair Committee, The Beacon will now give you a glimpse into the Corunna of yesteryear.

It is an average day in the bustling town of Corunna, its tree-lined streets shaded from the summer sun by thick green foliage. Horse-drawn wagons and carriages ply the rough dirt streets moving people and goods to their respective destinations. The blacksmith's hammer can be heard ringing with a steady rhythm within the smithy's shop as it beats a rod of molten iron into a new horse shoe or a sturdy gate latch. A group of ladies dressed in ankle-length skirts and starched white shirtwaist blouses hurry along the sidewalk on the way to Mr. Proctor's shop to buy new hats for the upcoming Methodist church social, while another group enters Mr. McGuire's store to pick up some baking supplies to make pastries for the same social.

From the east, a large passenger wagon carrying some finely-dressed oil executives enters the town on the way to the Fitzgibbon Hotel for a meeting with the local reeve and councillors. The cheap land and handy river transport holds promise for new petroleum-based business ventures. Along the way, they are impressed to see a thriving community that boasts three harness makers, two shoemakers, and a tinsmith. One of the men comments that such a town, located in such a beautiful river setting, might be a lovely place to build a summer home, a respite from the hustle and bustle of the oil business.

Meanwhile, at the Tobin Hotel, the local constable is reading the riot act to a pair of slightly inebriated sailors who have come to blows over the affections of the winsome miss who serves up lunch and wanton smiles in the hotel restaurant.

In the belfry of the Roman Catholic Church, a mournful funeral chime

reminds the town that one of their own has fallen victim to the merciless passage of time, while in another part of town, the angelic voices of the Presbyterian church choir can be heard practicing for Sunday service. And down the road, the Episcopal church is the scene of much activity as traps are set to foil an invasion of field mice that have been nibbling holes in the bellows of the church's pump organ.

At four o'clock, the raucous squeals of children newly liberated from their desks in the large, commodious schoolhouse spread throughout the town. Their studies are now forgotten in favour of hide-and-go-seek or cops and robbers. They have a whole summer ahead of them and not a minute of play must be missed.

In front of the post office, a young woman quickly opens a letter that bears a Toronto postmark. She smiles as she reads of the birth of her first niece and of her sister's first days of motherhood.

From the river comes the sound of men shouting as they set the sails on a river barge bound downriver for Sombra to pick up a load of lumber.

At dusk, the warm glow of kerosene lamps shine their welcoming light from every household and the setting sun adorns the river with a wide ribbon of sparkling gold. Corunna settles down for another day, all commerce ceased, all labours ended until the rising sun brings it one step closer to the future.

It is a future that will see combustion engine-powered vehicles glide along paved streets past computerized businesses, stores that offer an unimaginable selection of food and flowers regardless of the season, restaurants that offer exotic fare from faraway places like Greece, China, and Italy, and people who talk into tiny electronic devices while they walk along the street.

It is the Corunna that over 6,000 people will call home in a new municipality that will blend Moore and Sombra Townships into one beautiful place called St. Clair Township.

Century-old Wurlitzer military band organ opens Sombra Museum summer season

If you were anywhere near the St. Clair Parkway between Corunna and Port Lambton on May 17, you may have thought there was a carnival nearby. The music was actually coming from a Wurlitzer military band organ owned by Gerry and Cathy Koolen of Port Franks. The couple traversed the route to draw attention to the summer season opening of the Sombra Museum. The Koolen's bought the merry music maker in August, 2013, but the organ was built in 1916 by C.W. Parker of Kansas. Originally steam-driven, the organ spent years setting a jolly mood for a carousel. It was restored in 1986 and is one of only six Model 147 organs known to have been made. Gerry and Cathy enjoy taking the organ to special events and meeting other vintage band organ enthusiasts.

Sombra Museum seeks WWI items

World War I items, memorabilia or stories are being sought for the Sombra Museum's new exhibit to commemorate the 100th anniversary of "the war to end all wars". Call 519-892-3982 for more information.



Gerry Koolen of Port Franks explains the inner workings of the fully-mobile Wurlitzer model 147 military band organ. The instrument, once steam-driven, is now powered by a portable electrical generator.

Photo by Bonnie