

Share your memories ? large and small ? to celebrate 150th anniversary of Town Park



By Brock Weir

Town Park was a Mecca for music on Saturday night as thousands from across Aurora ? and beyond ? gathered there to celebrate the legacy of the Tragically Hip.

Whether you were there as fans of the Hip, or just to spend a musical night out with your family, chances are you left after the third encore with more than a few lasting memories.

You might think these memories might be small and insignificant in the grand scheme of things, yet they are anything but, according to Shawna White and Michelle Johnson of the Aurora Museum and Archives.

Ms. White and Ms. Johnson are hard at work collecting memories residents past and present have of Town Park ahead of the park's 150th anniversary.

Their project, which is being carried out with funding through the Virtual Museum of Canada's Community Memories Project, will chart Town Park's history from Canada's First Nations, to its development as a community gathering space and culminating in this past weekend's farewell to the Hip.

?I want to talk to people who were at the concert or little kids playing in the park to get their perspective on what this park means for them,? says Ms. White. ?There were some little kids here the other night saying, ?When I was little, we used to? and we want that multigenerational input.?

While the Aurora Museum and Archives has a significant amount of material related to the history of the park through the 1970s, memories, photos and artefacts from the 1980s to present day are few and far between, and that is just what they hope this project will remedy.

?A lot of times, memories are identified as trivial or routine and they pass them off, but know they are not trivial,? says Ms. Johnson. ?That is the stuff we want because it is the stuff we don't have. That is the stuff that will often be forgotten because it isn't some big, monumental event. That is why [our slogan] is Be A Part of History. We want to know those small, little stories so we can get into the larger story of Town Park.

?We were speaking to a mother recently about the outdoor skating rink and her first time here. The mum remembered everything

about what the environment looked like, the sun shining, how it was freezing cold, and now she plays hockey for the Aurora Panthers. She came here and was learning how to skate on that outdoor rink. That also speaks to the value of Town Park and it is a pretty good moment to reflect upon.?

When it comes to Town Park, there are some facets of its history that are well known to a good portion of Aurorans, including it being the location of Edward Blake's famous 'Aurora Speech', visits by Prime Minister Wilfrid Laurier and, given the historic Aurora Armoury on its northeast corner, as a site of drilling and practicing for the Queen's York Rangers and Army Cadets, as well as a marshalling place for these soldiers before heading off to fight in the First World War.

But there are little things too that Ms. White and Ms. Johnson feel are also very interesting and are clamoring to uncover.

'In the 20s, people would drive up when the automobile became more affordable and they would camp here,' says Ms. Johnston. 'There are reports about Americans coming up and camping in Town Park, and all the different purposes it has had and different uses. Its use as a constant community meeting place reveal a lot of really good stories. This is the B-side of stories that we're collecting from people and it is really exciting. Some of the stuff we have heard are things I never thought we would uncover.'

Adds Ms. White: 'The best image we have so far is the gentleman who didn't give away any names on who the culprit was, but who brought his new car and hooked it up to the newly installed flag pole in Town Park and took off and bent it over. Sure enough, there it is in The Banner with a photo and a firsthand account of someone who witnessed it. We want all the shenanigans.'

Outside of the 'shenanigans' they are also looking to fill in a few blanks, including firsthand stories from Wells Street Public School students, who used the park as their playground before the school itself was decommissioned and sold, as well as the whereabouts of Aurora's Boer War Memorial Fountain. This three-tiered fountain, originally placed on Yonge Street designed as a water fountain for dogs, humans and horses, was eventually moved to Town Park and the subject of considerable vandalism over the years.

However, after the 1950s, the fate of the fountain, its whereabouts and why it was removed, have fallen off the historical record.

'It survived the war, so it wasn't melted down for that,' Ms. White muses. 'I would love to know if it is in somebody's back yard because at least we know it was saved!'

To share your stories, photos, home movies, and mementos, contact the Aurora Museum & Archives, or head over to a Pop-Up display at the Aurora Public Library next Tuesday, August 30, from 12 noon to 3 p.m. and talk to Shawna and Michelle.