

**Next Meeting**

# Outlook

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*Those magnificent men in their flying machines*

## Rathbun and Mohawk high fliers

by Lewis Zandbergen

During the heady days of pioneer aviation, a minor chapter of the saga was written on the fields of a small Ontario town which for two years played host to airmen from the United Kingdom, Canada and the United States of America. Although such importance might have led to continuing prominence for the municipality, politics dictated a different future and the once promised boon left little in its wake except

a few disintegrating reminders of what could have been. The community is Deseronto and the final years of World War I, the war which engulfed Europe, would play a pivotal role in defining village life.

Allan Smith was the guest speaker at the Hastings County Historical Society regular monthly meeting held Tuesday, September 16. His was a story of how the establishment of the Rathbun and Mohawk airplane training bases at Deseronto influenced the town's makeup for a short while. His narrative peppered with colourful characters, Smith wove a tale of high-spirited activity beginning in 1917.

By 1917 flying machines had become a vital part of the war effort. That year also saw the first German dirigible raid on Lon-

don, England. This act strengthened the resolve of the Britons to beef up their aerial assault forces. The Royal Flying Corps had by the end of 1916 exhausted its ready supply of English flyers. Most had come from the officers' ranks in the regular British Army. A new and plentiful source of young pilots was needed and it was felt the Dominion of Canada would be the ideal place in which to recruit and

Rathbun family. The coming of the training bases meant new prosperity: merchants experienced a growth in business, churches and lodges received new members gladly and town fathers heaved a sigh of relief. Good times lay ahead.

By 1918 there were 12 hangars, barracks for the men, a mess hall, repair shed, 70 officers, 320 cadets, and 69 noncoms; about 450 young ladies worked at the bases in various capacities from

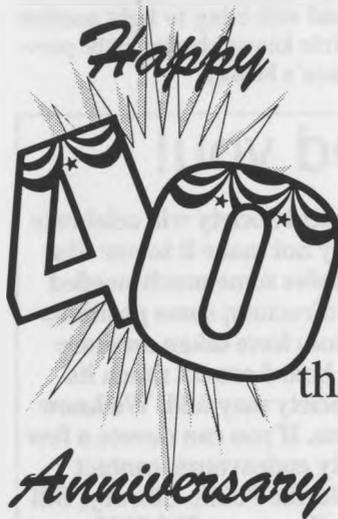
The Curtis Jenny was the training plane used most frequently at the Mohawk and Rathbun airfields.



stenographer to engine cleaners and repair persons. They ground valves, cleaned the garages and applied fabric to the airplane frames. On Boundary Road, in those days, there was a home which had been commandeered as a hospital, several houses which served as headquarters and a building which housed the Morse code and artillery spotting classes.

Perhaps the most colourful character to have graced the Deseronto area during 1917 and

*Continued on page 2.*



7:30 p.m.

**Tuesday, October 21  
Special Meeting!  
Special place!**

**Belleville City Hall  
Council Chambers**

**Two guest speakers!!**

**Gerry Boyce will recall how it all began and will take us on a stroll down memory lane in word and picture. Gerry will also have the society scrapbooks available.**

**Ernie Margetson will take the audience on a tour of Prince Edward County lighthouses.**

**Everyone is welcome to attend this special 40th anniversary**

**The Hastings County Historical Society, P.O. Box 1418, Belleville, Ontario K8N 5J1**

From the editor's bookshelf

## *Bon Echo: The Denison Years*

by Lewis Zandbergen

written by Mary Savigny  
drawings, photographs,  
endnotes, indexed  
published by Natural Heritage  
Books

Rarely do first-time authors produce a book which is as great a tribute to an individual as is Mary Savigny's biography of talented Canadian writer Merrill Denison; she weaves the story of Denison's life like a magical tale recounting details in a way which is neither cloying nor artificial. Genuine feeling is brought to the story of a man the author knew very well. Although the book could undoubtedly have been a much more detailed study of an obviously complex man, one does comprehend the sense of brilliance Merrill Denison possessed.

Denison was born in Detroit, Michigan, but began visiting the northern reaches of Lennox and Addington County very early in life. By 1910, his mother, noted Toronto feminist Flora MacDonald Denison, had purchased the Bon Echo site. She began running a camp which

played host to notable artists, "intellectuals, theatrical personalities" and writers of the era; artists A.Y. Jackson and Arthur Lismer, photographer Yousuf Karsh, and Walt Whitman biographer Horace Traubel all spent time at Bon Echo.

After his mother's death, Denison and his wife, Jessie Muriel Goggin, struggled to keep the camp a viable operation but it's clear from Savigny's writing and from Denison's wife's notes that the man had little or no business sense. He was first and foremost a wordwright. Even his successes in the literary field, however, could not salvage a business failure.

But, it is through this failure that Denison's beneficence comes to the fore. After years of rising and falling financial stability, Denison gave the site to the province of Ontario and its people. However, Denison did not become a wealthy man from this real estate transaction.

The author and her family

joined the Bon Echo fold in the early 1950s. Years spent working as a typist for Denison have given Savigny a perspective others might have missed and yet I can't help but get the feeling *Bon Echo: The Denison Years* is but a capsule account of Denison's life; but there may never be a more comprehensive account.

My only complaint about the book is the author's habit of jumping from one year or decade to another and then back again; it's confusing. On the whole, however, the book will serve to while away an afternoon and will bring to light another little known chapter in the province's history.

### We need you!

The Hastings County Historical Society will celebrate 40 years in 1997. But we may not make it to our 41st anniversary if we do not receive some much-needed volunteers for our board of directors; some positions remain empty, some directors have taken on more than one chore. But if the board cannot reach its required complement, the society may fold. We know you do not want this to happen. If you can devote a few hours per month to society endeavours, contact Elizabeth Mitchell at the Belleville Public Library, Bill Hunt at 962-4611, Lewis Zandbergen at 395-3022 or at [lewzan@connect.reach.net](mailto:lewzan@connect.reach.net) by E-mail or mail us at P.O. Box 1418, Belleville, Ontario, K8N 5J1. You'll reap the rewards of continuing heritage involvement and the Hastings County Historical Society will be able to continue its very important work.

## Suspected saboteurs charged, tried and executed

*Continued from page 1.*

1918 was Vernon Castle. Castle was a British-born American who had made a name for himself as a dancer in partnership with his wife, Irene. The idiosyncratic performer brought a monkey to the base and was also accompanied by two German shepherds; he roared around the countryside in a bright yellow Stutz Bearcat. A seasoned civilian pilot who brought his own plane replete with crest (what else—a castle) to the training grounds, Castle was attached to 84 Squadron as a teacher.

The practice in early training flights was to put the student in the forward cockpit while the instructor occupied the rear position. It was reasoned that students were expendable and could be easily replaced while competent instructors were hard to come by. After one crash in

which a student was killed, Castle decided to reverse this trend; he would occupy the front seat from then on. This practice was to lead to his death in Texas, in 1918, when a crash took his life but spared the life of the student pilot.

In late 1917 a rash of crashes at the bases caused a revolt among students and brought about an investigation of pro-German activities. Two civilians of German descent had allegedly been sabotaging planes by dumping acid on controls. They were hastily arrested, tried, convicted and executed. However, there is a smattering of doubt about their guilt and the speed of the trial and execution did not follow usual treatment of spies or saboteurs. Evidence later came to light which lent credence to the story. An elderly Mohawk was

interviewed some time ago and recounted the story of how the bodies of the saboteurs had been buried on his land. This Indian and his son went out under cover of darkness to remove the bodies. The elderly man said that when they reached the bodies there was the unmistakable sight of quicklime, a highly caustic substance which would have been used to speed decomposition.

Although this treatment of suspected spies was not common and a departure from the usual practice of incarcerating suspected spies in Kingston's Fort Henry, it was deemed acceptable; perhaps the authorities reasoned there had simply been too many lives lost in crashes.

However, plane crashes at the training fields were not uncom-

mon. At the McAlpine farm near Marysville, a plane obviously experiencing engine trouble veered too close to a tree. A branch snagged one of the guy wires which gave the wings stability and snapped it off; the wire flew through the air and decapitated the young pilot. Numerous aircraft also crashed into Lake Ontario; one dropped into the lake off the Sandbanks and it's thought the first local "sea" rescue craft were employed to bring the planes up and pilots' remains to shore.

All too soon the good times were over and the large base at Trenton eventually took the limelight. Deseronto returned to its former quiet way of life.

Mr. Smith's highly entertaining look at a chapter from the past was augmented by a slide show and many albums of pictures from the era.

# County News

by Gerry Boyce

## Gerry reminisces

October 1, 1957

I recall walking down Bridge Street in the early evening, crossing through Market Square, and entering the dimly-lit doorway to Belleville City Hall, where I climbed the long staircase to the second floor Council Chamber. A small group of citizens filled the seats that were occupied by councilors when council was in session.

I was there because of a small ad in *The Intelligencer*. Generously paid for by the Belleville Recreation Committee (a committee of Council), it advised citizens that another effort was being made to form an historical society for the Belleville and Hastings County area.

As a history grad from McMaster University and a teacher of history at Quinte Secondary School, I was attracted by the ad. Moreover, my uncle, Judge Gerald Smith of Napanee, was president of the Lennox and Addington Historical Society and had spoken two years earlier in Belleville in an attempt to start an historical society.

At the same time, I remember not being anxious to take an active part. After all, I had been teaching for less than a month, the classes were large, and the array of subjects was greater than I been made aware of when hired. Moreover, I had been married for only a few months.

Irene Haig chaired the meeting and was, therefore, a logical choice to head up the group. She declined, because of a busy writing and radio schedule. Finally, after considerable persuading and cajoling, the group had an executive. Tom Wrightmeyer, an antique dealer who helped furnish Upper Canada Village with appropriate furnishings, agreed to be-

come president, but just for a year. Teachers Ken Bird and Veva Robson became vice president and secretary respectively. Surveyor Tom Ransom (who became my best friend and later persuaded City Council to spend \$5,000 to purchase the Paul Lamp Collection for the museum) was named treasurer.

Caught up in the enthusiasm generated by the small but energetic group, and having worked summers in the news department of CJBQ (then 1270 on your dial and known as "The Voice of the Bay of Quinte"), I suggested that what the group needed was a publicity director. I was immediately nominated and agreed to fill the role.

Within two weeks I began to edit a series of "Historic Belleville" columns for *The Intelligencer*; they would appear weekly, more or less. A phone call to the Reverend Bowen P. Quire, (the Consecon archaeologist Lee Jourard and I had interviewed a previous summer for CJBQ) led to him agreeing to speak to our small Society on November 11. He spoke in the Council Chamber on the second floor of Shire Hall on Church Street across from BCIVS. His

talk (recorded by Lee Jourard for CJBQ) was the first of many such programs arranged by the Society.

When the Society celebrates its 40th anniversary on October 21, I will have the opportunity to show slides of the early years. In addition, I expect to be bringing one or two documents and the 14 scrapbooks outlining the history of historical societies in Belleville from 1884 to 1985. It's appropriate that the celebration is being held in the Council Chamber, now two stories above the Chamber of 1957.



### A new generation

I was delighted to work with Susie Boyce (daughter of Bev and self) this summer. She was cataloguing the Nick and Helma Mika Collection. It is an extensive collection of photographic and reference materials donated to the Society by Mika Publishing. The bulk of the collection will become part of the Society's Print Archives at the Corby Library and the Picture Archives at the Hastings County Museum. Some materials will be turned over to historical societies and li-

braries in Prince Edward County, Lennox and Addington County, Kingston, Ottawa, Toronto and elsewhere. The material was used in the preparation of the Mikas' many books on history, especially relating to the local area and railroading.

A choice picture in the Mika Collection shows the Belleville Collegiate Institute and Vocation School under construction in 1927. The picture has been featured in recent newspaper publicity.

There is continuing, feverish activity among those working to save the building. Encouraging developments include City Council's passing of a Notice of Intent to designate the building as being of architectural and historical importance.

### Historic Hastings

Did you know that there were two printings of this book? The first (almost 5,000 copies) was 30 years ago, in the summer of 1967. The second (over 3,000 copies) was in February, 1968. The second printing is the better one. It corrects several errors (including a reversed picture) and adds some text (for example the final paragraph on page 73).

### UEL day

It's great to see progress being made in the Ontario Legislature by MPP Harry Danford to have June 19 designated as United Empire Loyalists Day.

### Wanted

Call Gerry at 968-5023

If you remember attending the KKK's Third Annual At Home on Tuesday, January 29, 1929, in the Johnstone Academy, Front Street, Belleville. The Tweed and Area Historical Society has an invitation for the event.

If you have any information on David Volume Sinclair who died in Belleville in August 1922.

If you are familiar with a small medallion (about an inch in diameter) inscribed "Woodmen of The World" and "Dum taget clamat" (?). It shows a tree stump with crossed axes.



# Your County Museum

257 Bridge Street East, Belleville, Ontario, K8N 1P4 (613) 962-2329

## No longer "Your County Museum" in 1998

At the end of 1997 Hastings County will give up its ownership of and responsibility for the county museum with Glanmore being turned over to the new City of Belleville. What this means at Glanmore is a reorganized museum structure, a change of governance, a revision of the mandate and all policies. The full implications of this change are unknown at this time. We will endeavour to keep the public informed throughout the transition process.

## Introducing co-operative education students

Welcome to Shaun  
from Quinte Secondary School and Dave  
from Bayside Secondary School.  
They will be working with Christine in the  
Education Department until January.

## Dinosaurs in Bancroft a huge success!

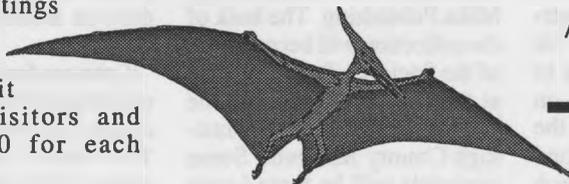
We omitted this report from the last issue of *Outlook*. For two weeks at the beginning of August Christine was in Bancroft with the Royal Ontario Museum's (ROM) dinosaur mobile exhibit in a joint fund-raising effort with the North Hastings Heritage Museum.

The exhibit saw 3,600 visitors and raised \$1,000 for each museum.

Local residents and visit-

ing cottagers were all thrilled at the educational opportunity this provided for Bancroft and area. (And Christine had a great time talking dinosaurs again!)

We look forward to future joint endeavours between the two museums.



Visit The  
HASTINGS COUNTY MUSEUM

Although only four years younger than the Hastings County Historical Society, the Hastings County Museum has been an integral part of the heritage scene. Now housed in an elegant 1880s mansion called Glanmore, the museum will cease being a "county museum" after amalgamation takes effect on January 1, 1998. This is a poster for the museum from 1963 and shows the original museum building, the former Shire Hall/Registry Office, which stood on the west side of Church Street across from Belleville Collegiate and Vocational School. *from the collection of Lewis Zandbergen*

## Now recruiting education volunteers

We are still looking for experienced individuals to work with visiting school classes.

Education volunteers are responsible for teaching 10 to 20 students from kindergarten to Grade 6 specially designed programmes which follow Ministry of Education guidelines.

School visits are 90 minutes in length.

All education volunteers are trained prior to each programme and new volunteers observe sessions before teaching.

Please call Christine for more information.

Outlook is published monthly for the Friends and Members of the Hastings County Historical Society.

It is edited and produced by Lewis Zandbergen. Anyone wishing to submit articles or information can contact the editor at 613-395-3022, Fax 613-395-4695, or E-mail [lewzan@connect.reach.net](mailto:lewzan@connect.reach.net)

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1996 (EM/KM)