"All the world's a stage"

Only five months after the Belleville Theatre Guild (BTG) produced its first play, *Voice of the People*, it won an award. Despite some tough times in the 50 years since, the Guild has continued to grow and excel, BTG President Jim Ross told the Hastings County Historical Society on January 22.

Mr. Ross had been invited to celebrate the Guild's half century by speaking at the annual meeting of the Society. Dressed as if from the theatre, not for the theatre, he looked as if he might have raided the costume cupboard in the dark. It was not, he pointed out needlessly, a normal suit and tie ensemble. He was in costume.

The Belleville Theatre Guild was born in June 1950 when a group of people got together and began reading plays for their own entertainment. After a while they decided to share their talents with the general public and took the first steps toward forming a theatrical society.

A few poured out their ideas at the Dickens Tea Room, then booked a more formal meeting at the Corby Library. On December 5 they presented their first production, a one-act play written by Robertson Davies. They took it to the Eastern Ontario Drama League festival in Peterborough, won an award, and were

Jim Ross delighted the audience at the January meeting of the Hastings County Historical Society.
photo courtesy The Community Press

invited to present it at the Dominion Drama Festival in Saint John, New Brunswick, as an example of the good things on-stage in eastern Ontario.

Mr. Ross said the play was re-enacted last summer on the veranda of Jim and Wilma Alexander's house.

For the first years of its existence, the BTG had no home of its own. Members would rehearse in private homes and offer their plays at BCI and other venues. In the late 1950s, public interest in the plays declined as television and other forms of entertainment became popular.

The BTG found its first permanent home, The Loft, a 99-seat theatre with a revolving stage in 1963. "It was one of the few revolving stages in Canada," said Mr. Ross. "That was quite an an innovative task for an amateur theatre guild." The revolving stage eliminated the need for on-stage set changes. The stage was divided into three pie-shaped sets; while one was presented to the audience, the other two sets backstage were changed.

Still, regular Belleville theatre-goers were rare. On opening night in the new theatre, only three people were in the audience.

In 1965, fire destroyed The Loft and everything the Guild owned.

For a few years after that disaster, the Guild produced radio plays on CJBQ until it moved into the building that became the Pinnacle Playhouse. Mr. Ross gave particular credit to Russell Scott, mayor at the time, for his support of the arts. Between 1981 and 1983, about $180,000 worth of renovations updated the theatre. Renovations continue. By September, 2003, the Guild hopes to have an elevator installed to provide "barrier-free" access to its theatre.

The "zenith" year, so far, was 1999, Mr. Ross said, when the Guild went to the all-Ontario drama festival with *Who's Afraid of Virginia Wolfe?* and won awards for best actress and best supporting actress.

After several curtain calls to answer questions, Mr. Ross returned his costume to the cupboard.

Next Meeting

Special Heritage Day Event

Monday, February 18, 2002

Topic

Black History Month

Refreshments at 7:30 p.m.

Meeting begins at 8 p.m.

Monthly meetings are held in the Auditorium of the Quinte Living Centre

370 Front Street, Belleville

Faces from the past

FOXBORO WOMEN'S INSTITUTE HASTINGS WEST 1954
BACK ROW: Mrs. Margaret McCurdy, Mrs. Gough, Mrs. Morgan, Mrs. Joslin, Mrs. Stella Ducette, Mrs. Vicki Simmons, Mrs. Tillie Brough, Mrs. Sheppard, Mrs. Walt.
MIDDLE ROW: Mrs. Bea DeMille, Mrs. Stella Stewart, Mrs. Marjorie Gay, Mrs. Margaret Reynolds, Mrs. Mary Kilpatrick, Mrs. Mary Jane Reynolds, Mrs. Mae Hollinger, Mrs. Lillian Jamieson, Mrs. Hilda Bamber.
FRONT ROW: Mrs. Ann Rombough, Mrs. Lillie Hubble, Mrs. Ruth Moore, Mrs. Beatrice Harry, Miss Eleanor Johnston, Mrs. Olga Shorey, Mrs. Helen Johnson, Mrs. Ruth Lewis, Mrs. Meyers.
courtesy Marilyn Harry daughter of Mrs. Mae Hollinger

Whatever happened to Captain Meyers' slaves?

by Lewis Zandbergen

There is no simple way to approach a subject as controversial as slavery. Even after over 200 years since the practice of selling other human beings into bondage was outlawed (1793) in what is now Ontario, the subject of slavery is approached with timidity for it still possesses the spark which can ignite violent argument.

Slavery has been practised worldwide since the dawn of man. Ancient civilizations were responsible for enslaving minority groups, and throughout recorded time, and well before, peoples as diverse as the American Indian and Asiatic nomads have been guilty of using other humans as unpaid menial labour.

In the United States of America slavery is often cited as the root cause of the American Civil War. In truth it was but one aspect troubling a nation which by 1861, the first year of the Civil War, had not yet celebrated its centenary.

It might come as a complete surprise to many to learn that our own nation and even our own county does have a past, though not as violent perhaps as the American, with a history of slavery. It was estimated in 1856 that almost 30,000 people of African-American ancestry lived in Upper Canada (now Ontario).

The founder of Belleville, John Walden Meyers, brought a slave family, the Levis, with him when he settled in what is now Hastings County in the 1780s. We don't know for certain how many members comprised the Levi family, but they had worked on the Meyers family farm in New York prior to coming to Upper Canada. Another person named Joseph Smith also resided with the family as a servant; we do not know for certain whether or not Joseph was of African descent.

Little is known about the Levi family except that one of the family, Betty, was baptized (probably by the Reverend John Langhorn who recorded the following christening in his register) in 1796: "March 2, 1796 - Billy (Betty) surnamed Levi, a negro girl living at the home of Johannes Walden Meyers, Thurlow Township, Hastings." This would seem to indicate she was likely under the age of 25 and that she accompanied the Levi family when they came north with the Meyers family in 1786. Captain Meyers freed his slaves when he arrived in the Bay of Quinte area; they would remain on his farm, however, as paid servants.

But his was not a solitary case. In her book, *The Rebels of Hastings*, Betsy Dewar Boyce states: " ... Wallbridge, Leavens and Finkle families brought their slaves with them." A Mr. H. Finkle, an Adolphustown shipbuilder, is said to have been the first Loyalist to free all of his slaves. (*The Rambling River*, Mary G. Plumpton, 1967.)

Thos. Green
The *Gazette*, December 13,
1800, York

To Be Sold — A healthy, strong, Negro Woman, about 30 years of age; understands cookery, laundry and the taking care of poultry. N.B.—She can dress ladies' hair. Enquire of the printers."

The *Gazette*, December 20, 1800, York

To Be Sold — A healthy, strong, Negro Man, 25 years of age; field hand; able to count;

John and Catherine Bleecker, another pioneer couple, also brought with them a "female negro slave." Immediately upon reaching the Bay of Quinte area the Bleeckers followed the Meyers' example and offered the girl her freedom but she stayed with the couple, again as the family servant. Her name was Black Ham and she had been an integral part of John Bleecker's life since he was a youngster. (There are accounts which claim the servant's name was Black Hans but there may have been a male black slave in the household as well.) Black Ham would go on to provide the first poled ferry across the Trent River at the new settlement of Trent Port, now Trenton, and also provided accompaniment for Bleecker's wife during the times he would go for supplies. Black Ham also eventually served as the navigator for Bleecker's ferry for many years. She lived to be a great age and passed away in 1825.

By 1852 William Hutton would write to his mother: "We have had three col-oured men working for us this harvest, escaped slaves; very excellent workmen and very intelligent men ..." He later railed against any notion that Upper Canada be compared to its southern neighbour. He wrote to his mother "[Canada] was a land of liberty and not of slavery." and later "I observe you all call Canada 'America.' We dislike the name. We have *no slavery* here."

John Graves Simcoe's edict of 1793 saw slavery abolished in British North America fully 70 years before American President Abraham Lincoln passed his Emancipation Proclamation (January 1, 1863). Simcoe also set the example for Great Britain which declared slavery illegal with the passing of the Emancipation Act of 1833.

But some habits were hard to break. As late as 1824 a Mr. William Bell of Thurlow Township paid $75 for the unexpired time of a mulatto named Tom. He was ten at the time and served his master until he was 21 years old; he was finally freed in 1835 and is most likely the last black man to have been freed in Thurlow Township.

Some of the stories surrounding slavery have to taken with a grain of salt. As mentioned in one account Captain Meyers freed all his slaves in 1786; however Mrs. Plumpton says in her book that " ... Black Betty was sold to Asa Wallbridge, Hector Leavens and John McLennan ... after Captain Meyers died (1821), and as she was most prolific, there were many Negro children in the community bearing those names for a long time. The husband of 'Black Betty' was a slave called 'Ham' owned by Squire Bleeker of Sidney." It says elsewhere that Ham was a woman (see above); and if "he" is the man named, he passed away in 1825 only four years after his former master's passing. Just how many children were born to this union?

As a historian and a genealogist, I'm interested in what eventually happened to the blacks who made their way north into Canada. Where did the Levi children go once they grew up? It would also be interesting to find out where they were interred after they had passed from this life. Were they buried in the same grounds as that of their former masters? As far as we know John W. Meyers fully intended that his family and his servants, the Levi family, would all be buried at the Sidney Burying Ground which is now the site of Whites Cemetery just east of Canadian Forces Base Trenton. However, a perusal of the cemetery lists indicates no persons named Levi having been buried there.
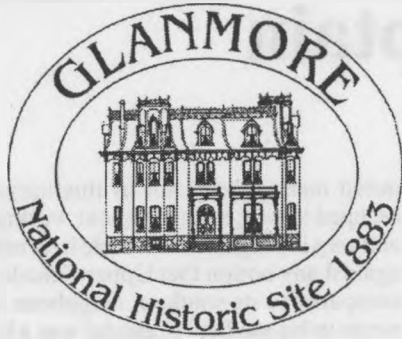
GLANMORE
National Historic Site
257 Bridge Street East,
Belleville, Ontario K8N 1P4
(613) 962-2329

Harriet Tubman was one of the most famous of the Underground Railway "conductors."

Special Exhibit
Passages to Freedom: Secrets of the Underground Railroad

Passages to Freedom: Secrets of the Underground Railroad will be on display at Glanmore National Historic Site February 18 to April 21, 2002

The struggle of those fleeing slavery in the U.S. is an exceedingly important part of Canada's history. Yet how many can trace its history?

The exhibition Passages to Freedom: Secrets of the Underground Railroad explores the story of over 40,000 slaves who fled the U.S. seeking freedom in Canada via clandestine routes known as the Underground Railroad.

The exhibit features many components including: shackles and whips used to confine and punish slaves; a recreation of a slave shack and panels relating to the lives of slaves; audio components that recreate Spirituals (slave songs) and relate tales of the underground; a recreation of the box used by Henry "Box" Brown to flee slavery; panels discussing the lives of former slaves after gaining freedom.

Don't miss out on this exciting exhibit that will arrive in Belleville just in time for Heritage Day and Black History Month! A thought provoking school program geared especially to Grade 4 to 8 students is also available to accompany Passages to Freedom. Call Melissa Wakeling, Education Co-ordinator at Glanmore (613) 962-2329 for more information.

This exhibition is part of the Travelling Exhibition Partnership collaborative. Welland Historical Museum, the creator of this exhibit, gratefully acknowledges the financial support of the Department of Canadian Heritage - Museums Assistance Program.

Celebrate Black History Month and Heritage Day!
Monday, February 18
Exhibit Opening and Open House at Glanmore National Historic Site
1 p.m. to 4p.m.
Tour Glanmore Heritage Day and enjoy a first look at the special exhibit Passages to Freedom: Secrets of the Underground Railroad. Refreshments will be served. Call (613) 962-2329 for more information.

PLEASE NOTE!
The Deadline for the March 2002 issue is February 20, 2001

mailing label