



Photo supplied by The Grenville County Historical Society

Above: The refurbished building that was the old Prescott Train Station has become the permanent home of the Grenville County Historical Society.

GETTING ACQUAINTED

with the Past

By Lisa Crandall

Family genealogy is a ‘trending’ hobby these days and when you live in a part of the country that has roots reaching back to the earliest settlers, even predating Confederation, The Grenville County Historical Society can be a fulfilling and fun place to volunteer. Yes, I said “fun.” The GCHS is a group of volunteers that operates out of the old train station in Prescott. They have turned their individual passions into a lively and laughter filled concern.

The original organization called the Grenville Pioneer and Historical Society was founded in 1891. Back in those days the primary qualification for membership was being the descendent of someone living in Canada in 1792 and, of course, being male (women were only allowed to become members after 1914). There was a brief hiatus to the society between 1924 and 1959, but it was re-organized and held its first official meeting in January 1960. Over the years the archives were housed in various places including the Grenville County Registry Office, The Prescott Municipal Building, assorted members’ homes, the Homewood Museum and finally, Crane House in Prescott. Always expanding and in need of more space, in 2007 they had the opportunity to set up shop in the abandoned building that was the former Grand Trunk Railway Station in Prescott. After a surprisingly short period of refurbishment, they created a working area that includes; office and

research space, a lovingly tended storeroom for artifacts including; clothing and a wide range, but limited, selection of items from homes and local businesses.

Most of the action happens in the two office/ research areas where large tables and shelves filled with documents take pride of place. The researchers respond to calls from all over Canada and often the United States, looking for information. Over so many years the collection of documents has become uniquely extensive. It includes material on individuals, families,

private houses, buildings, local businesses and organizations, as well as military and historical events. Documents include Grenville County birth, marriage and death records. Copies of the Brockville and Prescott newspapers on microfilm and church, cemetery and census records, as well as official documents, such as deeds and maps. In addition, there is a wealth of donated material including, personal photographs, scrapbooks, copies of local newspapers, video tapes and slides, etc. Much of it carefully indexed by the volunteers.



Photo Credit: Robert Erickson



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Above: One of the research tables is from early days of the Augusta Township Council, dating back to the 1850's. The Plexiglas covering preserves a plethora of gouges and doodles created over the years. Volunteer Gini Leonard takes full advantage of the table top while doing her research.



Photo Credit: Helen Mott

Left: A display case at the front desk houses an assortment of items donated from the personal collections of local townsfolk.

Above: Sandra Shouldice animating Abigail Gould Perrin, her great great great grandmother, during a walking tour of the Maynard Cemetery.



Photo Credit: Robert Erickson

Bottom opposite page: Oscar the telegraph operator, seated in the window overlooking the still used train tracks, is a popular favorite with visitors. Sitting with his back to the room he is the first 'person' you see as you enter and he is often mistaken for a real volunteer.

These archives can be searched in person for a small fee of \$2 per hour or volunteer researchers will do the searching at a rate of \$15 per hour. One of the benefits of membership in the GCHS is a reduction in these rates.

Although connected by their love of history, the interests of the volunteers are wide ranging and finds its expression in many forms. There is a member who loves to work with the objects that are donated. She specializes in creating the displays used for outreach projects, such as Doors Open and local business exhibits. Other volunteers who have a passion for photography are currently involved with a project to use social media as a tool to identify people and places in photos that have been gifted to the society. Members also turn their curiosity about specific events or locations in lengthy spiral bound reference documents that sometimes turn into books. These published books range the many historical stone houses in the area

(3 volumes to date), the historical plaques found throughout the county and collections of local stories captured in a 20-volume set of booklets entitled Pioneer People and Places. For a complete survey of the archived material and the books available, check out the website at <http://www.grenvillecountyarchives.ca/> These items can be purchased at the office during regular business hours or by email.

Recently one volunteer, Bonnie Gaylord, found herself in front of the camera, when an individual working on a documentary about "abandoned railways" arrived unexpectedly, to gather some footage after having exchanged several emails about the project. She was also involved in the background research for an award-winning film, 12 Years a Slave. One of the main characters, Samuel Bass (played by Brad Pitt), was from Augusta Township. She is presently just getting started on a project involving the history of local business, the Portolano Glove Factory.

For Sandra Shouldice, long-time volunteer and current president, one of her favorite recent events was a walking tour of the Maynard Cemetery entitled "Let the Stones Speak". During this event several volunteers dressed up in period costumes and were stationed at selected gravestones, where they spoke on behalf of the historical personages buried there. Shouldice spoke as her great great great grandmother Abigail Gould Perrin.

During the off-season (September through May) the office is open on Tuesdays between 10AM and 4PM. During the summer (June, July, August) the office is open five days a week, courtesy of a grant that allows the hiring of a student researcher. If you are interested in joining the crew of volunteers that makes the GCHS such a going concern, drop by the office any Tuesday. Young or old there is bound to be a place for you and whatever niche of local history you are interested in exploring. **LH**