



Left: Athens' British Home Child Monument was recently honoured with the placement of the BHC 150 flag and symbolic sunflowers. The monument includes a photo of Brockville's Fairknowe Home.

Above: David Cheyne was a local farm hand. He was wounded in WWI and never revealed that he was a British Home Child.

Above Middle: Charles Dickens' "A Christmas Carol" was written during a period of devastating poverty in Britain when many street urchins were sent to Canada as Home Children.

Right: Athens Police Chief Scottie McLean joins neighbourhood youth on a Walkathon to raise money for the local rink.

150 YEARS OF BRITISH HOME CHILDREN IN CANADA: They Came with so Little & Contributed so Much!

By Sally Smid

This year marks the 150th anniversary of the arrival of British Home Children in Canada. Interested groups, individuals and communities in Canada and around the world were asked to mark this milestone with 'Beacons of Light' displays in their memory. Local memorials were decorated with the BHC flags and symbolic sunflowers.

These children, between infancy and 18 years of age, arrived here from Great Britain between 1869-1940. They were not generally orphans, but were impoverished for various reasons and often institutionalized in workhouses, residential schools, farms, reformatories, or homes run by a variety of philanthropic societies. These children were victims of poverty, often due to unemployment in Britain's industrial revolution. Charles Dickens was authoring his books such as *A Christmas Carol* and *Oliver Twist* during this era. His own personal experience with childhood poverty and feelings of abandonment were a heavy influence on his writings. It might even be noted that it was more than likely the "home child" was also an inspiration for Anne Shirley Montgomery's central character in *Anne of Green Gables*.

Such children often wandered the British streets and were taken away or given up by their parents who were usually too poor or incapacitated to provide for them. Their final destination was often emigration to Canada for the chance at a better life. Both governments supported this program which provided work for children who were 10 and older. Younger children were often adopted by interested families. Male home children usually were placed in rural areas, as much help was needed on farms. Most had never seen a cow or plow and were unfamiliar with such frigid winters. Girls often went to urban areas where they worked as domestics or in businesses.

Local MP Steve Clark was instrumental in helping to designate **Sept. 28th, 2019** as British Home Child Day in Ontario. In the House he told the story of home children like Scottie McLean who later served his country in WWII as many like him did, eager to defend their former homeland. Perhaps recalling the hardships of his own youth and wanting to be a role model and guide to youth, he volunteered with the Scout and Boys Club programs and supported the local rink. He eventually revealed that because of all of the trouble he got into on the streets, he was given

the choice to either go to jail or to Canada as a home child. Ironically, he served as the Athens' Police Chief for many years! McLean's home child friend Tom Lightfoot told of being mistreated at the farm where he was placed. The postman found him crying at the mailbox one morning. The kind postal worker brought him home and took over in raising him. Home child Jimmy Paterson was fortunate enough to inherit the farm where he worked. He created a BHC monument in the Athens Memorial Park. His home child trunk and McLean's uniform are part of a BHC display in the Athens Museum which also houses many more home child archival details. Securing information is a challenge due to much related stigma. Most families have little information and many do not want to recall or disclose the cruel treatment they received.

Some 100,000 home children came to Canada and today it is estimated that one in five Canadians have descended from British Home Children. Many of them did quite well in Canada and most worked very hard. So many home children came with so little, but so many gave so much to their new homeland! **LH**