

Memories of Victorian Canada preserved at Stoney Creek's Erland-Lee residence

By Terry McNamee

Victor and Hilda Beachin are plain people, exuding the warmth and friendliness that characterize rural Ontario.

Together they share a unique and important occupation as host and hostess of the historic Erland Lee Home, located on Ridge Road in Stoney Creek. The Beachins take great pride in their work, and like nothing better than to share their extensive knowledge of the local history with visitors.

"We have people come from all over the world," says Mrs. Beachin. "They often make a special effort to see the Lee Home during their trip to Canada."

The gracious white frame house sits on 2.9 acres of the original Lee homestead, which was established by United Empire Loyalist James Lee in 1792. The yellow roses and orange tiger lilies he planted can still be seen today on the beautifully-kept grounds surrounding the house. Lee himself built the seven-foot-tall kitchen cabinet from virgin pine which grew on his land. James Lee was accidentally killed while helping to build the first frame house in Saltfleet Township, and when his son John married in 1801 he was given the Crown Deed to the land. John replaced the original log cabin with a frame house built from the homestead's own pine boards.

In 1860, John's son Abram Lee planned the present house, "Edgemount", and in 1873 finished the front portion of the house and removed the back part which had been built earlier. The handsome verge boards on the gables and front porch were hand-carved in the shape of joined maple leaves by a 14-year-old carpenter's apprentice, who needed an entire summer to complete the intricate craftsmanship. The house was undoubtedly considered very modern when it was built, since it has no fireplaces. At that time, fireplaces were going out of style and were being replaced by large iron stoves, an example of which still sits in the old pioneer kitchen.

John's grandson, Erland Lee, was the fourth generation of Lees to occupy the site, and he used the 100-acre property to produce fruit, maple syrup, fancy dairy butter, and fine Jersey cattle. Erland was well-known in the area as a prosperous farmer and businessman, and it was during his residen-

cy that the house achieved its primary historical significance. Erland was a charter member of the Farmer's Institute of South Wentworth, founded in 1882, and later became Secretary-Treasurer and President of that organization.

In 1897, Erland Lee and his wife, Janet Chisholm Lee, became instrumental in the establishment of the world's first Women's Institute. A group of interested people gathered together in the Lee home, and as they sat around the old dining room table they drew up the first Constitution for the new organization. Janet Lee herself wrote it out in flowing script. Today a photocopy of the original Constitution sits in a place of honor on the original walnut table in the dining room. It is a much-prized memento of the beginnings of the Women's Institute, which has since become established in 74 countries around the world.

After sheltering six generations of the Lee family, a long-cherished hope was fulfilled when the Federated Women's Institutes of Ontario was able to purchase the house, thus assuring its preservation. On June 15, 1972, the 75th Anniversary of the Women's

Institute was celebrated when the Lee home was officially transferred to the Institute. The purchase included several of the original furnishings, in particular the old pine kitchen cupboard and the dining room table.

Renovations were begun immediately to restore the house to its original early Victorian style. With new paint and wallpaper and a fresh sanding of the original pine floor, the house began to take shape, and the donation of period furniture, clothing, ornaments, toys, and many household articles added the finishing touches.

Today, the house has been restored so completely that the visitor feels like a guest in a lovely private home. The back door leads into the kitchen, which is complete with apple slices drying on a rack over the stove. In a nearby corner, a primitive wooden washing machine looking like a mechanical washboard sits ready for use. This is a house which once rang with children's laughter; in the parlor, two child-sized chairs await their small owners. Framed prints of dogs and children and

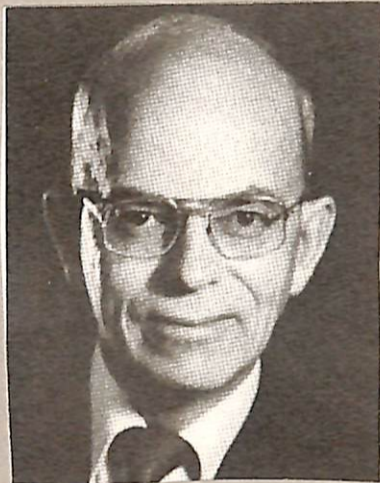
gentle farm animals reflect the tradition of the house and its original furnishings. The dining room is resplendent with a glorious glass chandelier which sends bows of sunlight dancing across the polished surface of the old walnut table.

Upstairs, two bedrooms and a sewing room look only recently vacated by their rightful occupants. Hand-made quilts cover the beds, and in the closets freshly-pressed clothes hang in readiness. In the nursery, little grey donkey and his brightly-painted cart stand obediently on a shelf, watched over by a quartet of much-loved dolls. The door is carefully guarded from cold air draughts by a long, smiling, brown Dachshund, whose plush body doubles as a doorstop when the door is open.

Next to the house, there is a building called the Driving Shed. Originally used for storing wagons, buggies, sleighs, and cutters, it features an upper floor with a large hole cut in the centre. Above the hole a winch was built to raise and lower the vehicles in the spring and fall, when those not in use would be stored upstairs. This building has been extensively renovated, and is now insulated and heated. Today it is used as a showroom for additional artifacts such as quilts, tools, and utensils.

For seven years now, Hilda and Victor Beachin have been acting as official hostess and host at the Erland Lee Home. A Women's Institute member since 1938, Hilda and her husband take a strong personal interest in their work. Together the Beachins provide visitors with historical information and a personal insight into the uses of many of the artifacts on display. Mr. Beachin is worried about the loss of knowledge from past generations. "I hope that someday it will be possible to use the Driving Shed as a special classroom to teach children some of the old crafts that are slowly disappearing," he says.

The Erland Lee Home is open weekdays from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. from March until January. Visitors are invited especially to come out on December 3 and 4, when the house is dedicated for a Victorian



LOCAL MUSEUMS RECEIVE OPERATING GRANTS

My colleague, Nick Leluk, formerly Minister of Citizenship and Culture, announced late in June that two museums in Wentworth were receiving operating grant support from the provincial government. One of these is the Canadian Warplane Heritage Museum at the airport in Mount Hope, in the Glanbrook part of my riding.

In addition to receiving a substantial operating grant, the Warplane Heritage Association also was given funding for an Experience '85 summer student to work as the tourism officer.

The second museum is in Stoney Creek, the Erland Lee (Museum) Home. Many of us know it well, in its wonderful location at the top of DeWitt Road in Stoney Creek, overlooking the escarpment brow.

*July 31st 1985 C. Leluk
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