



—Citizen file photos

Richard Gill, standing on amphitheatre foundation, still thinks theme park can be developed.

Financial woes fell Timbertown

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HORTON TOWNSHIP

To most people shanty towns, square-timber construction and pointer boats don't mean much. To Ottawa Valley folk these legacies from the lumbering era are a source of fierce cultural pride.

Stepdancing, fiddlin' festivals and log-rolling contests have helped to keep this heritage alive generations after it all ended.

Timbertown Theme Park was to ensure the legacy lived on. But after years of preparation, the park still hasn't opened because it's unable to attract sufficient investment.

Timbertown was supposed to preserve the logging culture of the 1890s while attracting thousands of tourists to this economically downtrodden area.

It was to be the Upper Canada Village of Renfrew County. Plans included an operating sawmill, blacksmith shop, school house, square-timber homestead, log drives and amphitheatre to show off Valley talent.

Area residents loved the idea. They bought \$260,000 worth of shares. But today, the funds spent long ago, many despair of ever seeing their money again.

Timbertown owes another \$300,000 to its creditors and plans are in the works to sell a substantial portion of the park's 705 acres along the Ottawa River, halfway between Arnprior and Renfrew.

Bob Charbonneau and Richard Gill, two key players in developing Timbertown, agree the project has become a complicated mess.

They hope 100 acres can be salvaged and a smaller version of Timbertown built.

"I may be crazy, but I still think we can develop it," says Gill, a Burnstown sculptor. "I don't think the dream is dead."

Adds Charbonneau: "There's more built there than most people realize. I firmly believe in Timbertown."

Their optimism was shared by the 1,600 area residents who bought 25 per cent of the shares in Timbertown while waiting for the major investor who never materialized.

Without such an investor, the theme park had to be developed piecemeal, and the opening date continually was pushed back. Charbonneau, involved with the project until 1986, said "we tried everything and we couldn't get anyone to bite."

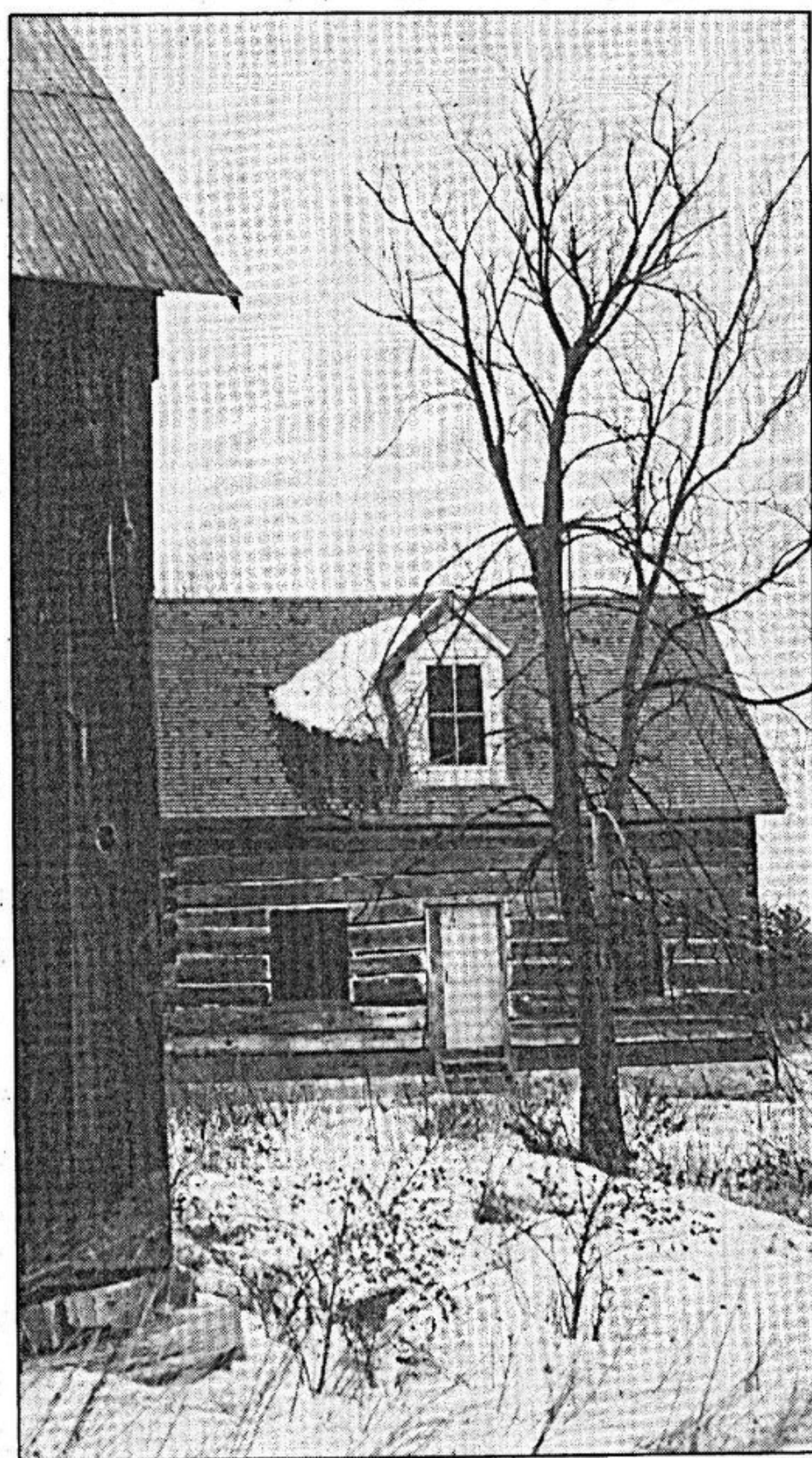
Timbertown began in 1952 as the dream of valley folklorist Bernie Bedore, best known for his stories about Big Joe Mufferaw, the larger-than-life Ottawa Valley log driver.

Bedore and Charbonneau originally planned a 50-acre development in Calabogie. They asked the province for help.

In 1975 the Ministry of Tourism and Recreation adopted the original idea and transformed it into a 705-acre megaproject that was to attract 500,000 visitors a year, employ 300 and inject \$3 million into the local economy.

In 1982 the ministry spent \$650,000 buying property near Castleford on the Ottawa River. That sparked Bedore, Charbonneau and other enthusiasts to push on with what would prove to be a fruitless search for private investors.

That year they sold shares to local residents and raised the \$260,000. The province provided a \$350,000 grant and the project's managers also took advantage of



Square-timber homestead one of the buildings on site

a series of federal make-work grants.

Over the next three years, the site of the 1890s theme park was partially developed.

Nearly 40 kilometres of roads were built and hydro, sewage and water services installed.

A square-timber homestead and turn-of-century school house were moved to the site overlooking the Ottawa River. A blacksmith shop was recreated. An old-fashioned, functional sawmill and a shake mill were erected.

The original investors, led by Charbonneau, formed Timbertown Inc., but couldn't find the major investors they desperately needed. The project plunged into debt.

Finally, in the summer of 1986, when a hoped-for deal with a West German amusement entrepreneur fell through, Timbertown creditors couldn't be held at bay any longer.

"We had tried every conceivable way to develop the park.

Nothing worked for us," says Charbonneau.

That's when the shareholders stepped in. Charbonneau said the five original members of Timbertown Inc. agreed to give its 45,000 shares to the co-operative, giving Timbertown Co-op complete control of the venture.

The co-op board was hesitant to take on the shares because of the project's huge debt load.

Co-op president Richard Gill and his board came up with a plan to develop Timbertown slowly, over a decade or more, by using local volunteers rather than searching for outside investment.

The board also planned to sell off some of the land to pay creditors.

The Ministry of Tourism has a 40-year re-conveyance clause on the land to ensure it is developed as a theme park. It agreed to the co-op's plan to sell land and in January, Timbertown Co-op became 100 per cent shareholders of

Timbertown.

But the co-op's plan was thwarted by a zoning freeze imposed by Horton Township Council.

Reeve Milt Stephenson said council placed a one-year freeze to give the co-op time to put together a concrete plan and to protect the township from unwanted development.

One of the council's major concerns was that there had been no shareholders' meetings for five years and nobody knew what was going on with Timbertown's development, Stephenson said.

In the spring, Timbertown Co-op found two prospective land buyers, both local farmers, willing to pay \$120,000 for 300 acres. But Horton Township wouldn't lift the zoning freeze, sticking by their original plan for a one-year breathing space.

Timbertown Co-op also presented the tourism ministry with a long-range development plan for the theme park, but the ministry said there was no money.

The final blow came Nov. 11 when Tim Campbell, acting treasurer of Timbertown Inc., was charged with failing to file corporate taxes in 1985.

Gill and the entire Timbertown Co-op board of directors resigned. "All of a sudden, we were liable for Charbonneau's group's mistakes. We resigned to protect ourselves from being summonsed," said Gill.

To make matters worse, Horton Township decided to "rattle the cage," said Stephenson, in an attempt to get something moving on the project.

The township proposed setting up a group of interested debtors to sell Timbertown and get their money back. Timbertown owes the township \$25,000 in back taxes.

Gill asked the tourism ministry for help and an agreement was reached Nov. 18.

Dan Hunnisett, the ministry's manager of industry development, said the ministry wants all the creditors to get their money back. He told Gill to hire Peat Marwick Consultants to handle the financial mess.

Peat Marwick is to present its plans to shareholders Wednesday at a general meeting.

Burnstown resident Tim Gordon says he considered his \$50 investment a gamble. "We could have won in a big way. My hat goes off to all the people who worked so hard. At least we tried."

Gill says he hopes the 100-acre developed core of the project is left after everyone is paid off.

"I am still convinced local people, volunteering their considerable talents, could build Timbertown."

Gill adds the plan now is to amalgamate Timbertown Inc. and the co-op and create a non-profit foundation.

"This will go a long way to cleaning up the project's image and giving it a fresh start," he says.

Gill says he also is convinced selling 605 acres will pay off all debts, leaving 100 acres to develop a less commercial, heritage village.

He said the park would serve recreation and heritage needs as well as being a forum for Valley arts and crafts people.

Despite all the disappointments, Gill still becomes excited when he talks of the possibilities.

"I think the valley culture is really unique and is well worth preserving."