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Steam Era has grown says Hornby founder

By MAGGIE HANNAH Herald staff writer

What began as a vague idea of possibly putting on a display of old steam engines has mushroomed into Steam Era, one of the largest steam shows in Canada,

Gordon Brigden of Hornby remembers the night the Ontario Steam and Antique Preservers Association was born in Leslie Lowe's farm house near Eden Mills. It was a cold December night in 1960 but 38 men showed up to toss around ideas on how to organize a show of their own. They chose Bill Bailey from Brampton as their president, Lestie Lowe as their vice president and Mr. Brigden was their treasurer. He held the post until 1970.

The location for their show was one of the questions that took a lot of discussion. Some people wanted to hold it on a farm while others felt it would be better to set up in a recognized exhibition field or a park. In the end it was decided to hold the show on Labour Day weekend in the Milton Fairgrounds.

Mr. Brigden feels this was the ideal situation for it since the grandstand in the fairgrounds provides a perfect place for tired spectators to sit down and rest a bit and still see the exhibits and activities going on at Steam Era.

FIRST SHOW

The association started up their first show with \$170 and a lot of volunteer transportation to get exhibits to the show. They made \$4,000 the first year even though the admission price for adults was only 65

Detractors told the association members that even if the public turned out to see the show one year they wouldn't come back again. Time has proved their theory to be very wrong.

Mr. Brigden says that through the years many spectators have told association members how much they enjoyed the exhibits. They had assumed they'd never see the old equipment working again and the exhibits bring back a lot of memories.

The first shows lasted only two days, Friday and Saturday. Now the show runs four full days. The association too has expanded from the original 38 members to around 500, many of them from the United States.

Mr. Brigden's acquaintance with steam engines goes back to his childhood when he first started playing around with a small stationary engine at the age of six. He still has the whistle from that engine mounted on the roof of his shop. On a clear day with the wind in the right direction the whistle can be heard for five miles be says.

Mr. Brigden says he has always had an interest in all kinds of engines and taught himself how to repair them. He operated his machine shop at the corner of Trafalgar Road and Steeles Avenue until he took sick last September with a rare ailment, Gillanberry Syndrome, and had to give it up because his fingers are numb.

He was born on a farm on Trafalgar Road near Five Sideroad. His father farmed and did earpentry work. Mr. Brigden had six brothers and two sisters. Only two of his brothers are still living.

FIRST EFFORT

His first effort at restoring steam machinery was in 1959 when a Mr. McDuffie from Milton brought him a steam engine to repair. The old engine was so badly rusted it took all winter working at it to get it in working order. He used crowbars to get the rusted gears to move and even needed help to heave on the crowbars.

Mr. Brigden says that steam buffs don't take their machines out to be repaired. They do it themselves.

"There's no fun in it if you have someone else do it," he says. "You have to work at it long hours or there's no kick out of it at all. It means something to you if you do it yourself."

While he was working at restoring all sorts of machines Mr. Brigden says he never made a business of restoring and selling things. What he fixed up he usually kept allhough he has recently sold a number of his antique machines to the Halton Agricultural Museum at Milton because he was worried about what would eventually happen to them.

Hunting for old steam engines is like hunting rabbits, he says. They're apt to be anywhere. Some were sluck away in the back of buildings where

Gordon Brigden shows the boiler of an Eagle tractor which he has restored and taken to Steam Era shows in the past. Since his illness which hospitalized him for six months earlier this year be is no longer exhibiting in the annual show.

they'd be out of the way but a lot were just abandoned wherever they were being used when they were replaced by something more modern.

"The people who awned them figured they'd never use them again so they just left them," he explains.

He has seen trees growing up right through old engines abandoned in woodlots as well as ones that were rusted very badly with exposure to the elements.

In the early 1960s Mr. Brigden says engines could be bought for \$250 but today n , similar engine would cost \$8,000 to \$12,000 depending on its size and state of repair.

BUYING ENGINE The one point to watch for in buying a steam engine Mr. Brigden warns is the condition of the boiler. If the boiler is worn out the engine is finished. The boiler can't be fixed. If the fault is in the engine the buyer can always get a part built or repaired to make the engine work, but not the boiler.

"We haven't the equipment or the men with the know-how to build boilers today," he says, "so any that are made have to be made individually

and that's very expensive." Modern boilers are put together with electric welds rather than the old-fashioned rivets and this makes for a very dull, drab effect. "You need the rivets to show

it off," he says. Painting steam engines in their original colours is also difficult since the manuals and other descriptions have usually been lost long ago and even the old timers don't know what colour various engines were painted.

In addition to operating his machine shop Mr. Brigden used to keep records for the Ministry of the Environment and the Ontario Water Resources Commission from 1967 to 1977.

The government supplied him with machines to record temperatures, register the time of sunrise and sunset record the amount of rainfall, record the wind's velocity, and direction and record the barometric pressure. He also measured the amount of water in each of three test wells drilled by the Ontario Water Resources Commission as a way of recording the watertable in the area.

Keeping the detailed records required by the ministry took a lot of homework, Mr. Brigden says and many people won't tackle the job since it must be done daily and thus represents a permanent tie. Reports went to the ministry each month.

The biggest rain storms to hit the area since Hurricane Hazel in 1954 happened to years ago. The first storm hit July 25 but didn't do much damage in town since most of the rain fell south of Stewarttown. The second storm was on August 26 and it really flooded things, Mr. Brigden recalls.

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