

A spirit of renewal

Country Heritage Park is an interactive museum unlike others

BY DEBORAH QUAILE



A lot goes on here. It's not just a passive museum," notes Reg Cressman, General Manager of Country Heritage Park. Formerly known as The Farm Museum, the park opened in 1979 and was run by the Government of Ontario until it was "dropped" in 1996-97. Faced with a sudden loss of funding, the park had to come up with new concepts for programs and to make the business self-sustainable.

"Our mandate was to take the site and make it self-sustaining. We had \$100,000 from the province and very little other funding, except for some input from the Town of Milton Community Fund. Our objective is to reduce the need for monetary assistance to zero. We had to move away from how things were done before. Now we don't do anything without a customer to pay for it."

With that concept firmly

in place, Mr. Cressman realized that a large paid staff was impossible to maintain. The park relies on approximately 600 person days of volunteers and special interest group time annually to staff the buildings. In this way, the park receives excellent curatorial care of the artifacts by knowledgeable volunteers. As a thank you, Country Heritage Park holds a Volunteer Appreciation Night with Christmas dinner and an awards ceremony.

"This place runs with the support of the people who use it," he acknowledges.

Although often still thought of as a museum, the park is a special event, meeting and training spot for numerous groups. About 30 weddings take place every year, either in the Gambrel barn or the church. Although it may sound like a wedding *faux pas* to hold a reception in the barn, the white pine post and beam loft construction holds a rustic appeal for ceremonies, while a dinner dance can be held below. For smaller ceremonies, 80 people will fit in the cozy 19th century church and can saunter over afterward to Puslinch Hall for a country-style dinner. Country Heritage Park can even arrange for a white lan-

dau coach and team to whisk the couple to the hall.

Partnerships with the Halton Regional Police, local firefighters, and ambulance crews add depth to the unusual happenings at the park. When no other groups are using the facilities, simulated hostage takings occur at empty buildings as SWAT teams and motor homes with communication systems sweep into position. Ambulance drivers do their practice work with a Gator that's reconditioned for off-road work.

"A lot goes on here - it's not just a passive museum. From the first of September to the end of June school tours from grades JK to 8 visit for curriculum-linked programs. Well-trained historical interpreters in full period dress speak in the first person when kids ask them questions. It's the kind of thing that a teacher can't take into the classroom: Heritage, history and food production in an out-of-the-classroom experience. We even have Girl Guides and Brownies come to train for their badges here."

"Along with our growing education programs we hope to hold a Civil War re-enactment next summer with a local group acting the parts of the Blue and the Grey. The Puslinch Hall would be the

infirmary."

Taking the park from a passive museum to an interactive centre has been no easy feat. The name change to Country Heritage Park occurred because before visiting, most young families thought that the museum displays were behind glass - the regulation, passive, "don't touch" displays. Visitors would often expect the museum to be a solitary building and were surprised to hear that there were 80 acres to roam and 31 buildings to explore. The artifacts at Country Heritage Park are restabilized and reused. Old tractors run up and down the roadways, livestock grazes in the field, and looms hold blankets in the process of being woven.

The park barter with community groups for additional services and uses its charitable status to keep costs lower. Building space is rented to other businesses. Special events such as the Parade of Lights which features seasonally decorated farm equipment, or *On the way to Bethlehem*, an outdoor Christmas Nativity Pageant, draw crowds in off hours. With such constant diligence the staff are making inroads to permanent viability.

In an odd twist of fate, perhaps the provincial "dumping" of the former Farm Museum was a good thing. In a thoughtful drive to create out-of-the-box programs, Reg Cressman, Sales and Administration coordinator Darlene Roach and Site Manager Carson Brown have the park open 24 hours a day and 12 months of the year for anyone who's booked its resources.

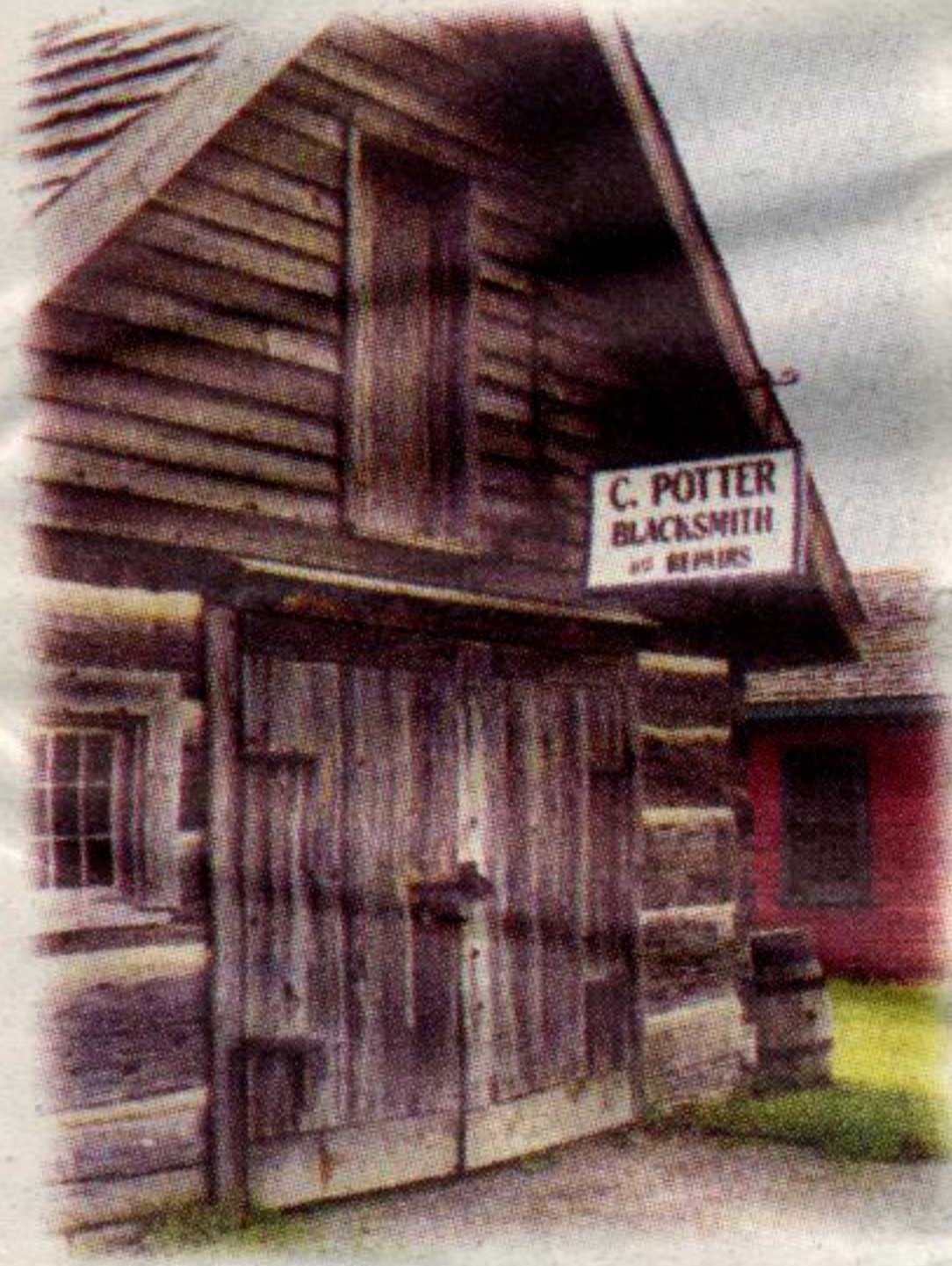
Milton, Ontario



"We're active, busy and being used and that's what interests the people that provide the revenue to keep Country Heritage Park going." And although some of the other museums may look skeptically at them, "We'll make it," Reg Cressman assures.

Country Heritage Park
8560 Tremaine Road,
Milton
1-888-307-3276

www.countryheritagepark.com



Parade of Lights

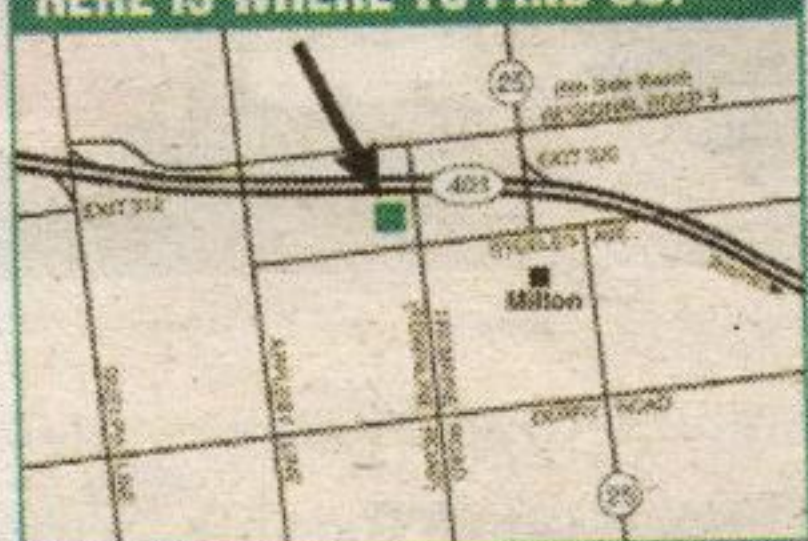
Saturday November 22, 2003

6:30 pm Gates open • 7:00 pm Parade starts
Country Heritage Park, Milton, Ontario

Come & Experience the Season

- * Spectacular Parade of antique tractors and machinery decorated with coloured lights
- * Refreshments served indoors following the parade
- * Gambrel Barn will be decorated for the festive season
- * Enjoy the sounds of Christmas music
- * Santa Claus and his helpers
- * Christmas will be in the air at Country Heritage Park
- * Great fun for the whole family

HERE IS WHERE TO FIND US!



Admission is by donation

COUNTRY HERITAGE PARK

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(off the 401 just west of Milton)



On the way to Bethlehem

Friday, Saturday, Sunday and Monday
Nov. 28, 29, 30 & Dec. 1
6:30pm - 9:00pm at Country Heritage Park
8560 Tremaine Rd., Milton

This production is a cooperative project of
Milton Area Christian Churches Working Together

"On the Way to Bethlehem" is an outdoor Christmas Nativity pageant. Accompanied by a "guide," visitors will walk the road to Bethlehem in small groups, interacting with Roman soldiers, shepherds, wise men and fellow travellers to reveal the Christmas story. After completing their "journey," visitors will be given a wagon ride back to the reception area for refreshments and Christmas music.

For more information, email nativity2003@canada.com

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