

Challenging future for Country Heritage Park

Survival will depend on donations

By JENNIFER ENRIGHT

Seven years ago, Country Heritage Park went from being an organization operated by the Ontario government to one run by a not-for-profit charitable organization known as Country Heritage Incorporated. It was a major change for the park, and a turning point in its history.

CHP's general manager, Reg Cressman, says the park could have become a cemetery at that point. At the time, the provincial Ministry of Agriculture and Food decided it no longer wanted to operate the park. However, people were upset enough about its possible closure that the park negotiated an operating agreement with the province.

Today the park is experiencing yet another signif-

icant moment in its history, and once again the question of its survival will become a subject of discussion. Mr. Cressman says the government intends to get rid of its core business at CHP and discontinue its funding of the site. In 1997, the park received \$325,000 from the Ministry of Agriculture and Food, but that funding amount was reduced in subsequent years with \$100,000 allocated to the park in 2003 and another \$100,000 this year.

"GOVERNMENT INTENDS TO...DISCONTINUE ITS FUNDING OF THE SITE."

Mr. Cressman explained that the government has no intention of continuing to pay out this money to Country Heritage Park and there are plans to give up ownership of the land and buildings on the site as well. "We are trying to find a way to help with that problem."

To ensure its survival, the park will need to actively pursue donations, promote partnerships, solicit support from the private sector and engage the community in its efforts to sustain Country Heritage Park as a viable site. Establishing a capital base will be among the most important steps undertaken once a deal is struck with the government. "We need to have a capital base to weather the ups and downs of the economic or business cycle."

In the mid-1960s, when the provincial government established the park, cost-cutting measures were less of a concern. Mr. Cressman says the political leaders involved in its establishment showed a lot of foresight by deciding to create a museum designed to commemorate and celebrate rural heritage. This vision carried forward through the 1970s up until 1997 when its operation was taken over by Country Heritage Incorporated. Prior to 1997, the government employed 40 people at the site. Today, there are four people employed at the park as well as many volunteers that support its efforts, including 15 volunteer directors.

Attracting business became a major concern for the park and this involved a change in thinking about CHP's role as a museum. Instead of billing itself as just a museum, the park took on a variety of other roles. Today, Country

Heritage Park offers educational programs for children and school groups and it provides a venue for weddings, corporate launches, parties and trade shows. This is also a museum where you can find the Milton Fire Department engaged in training or the Halton Regional Police using the park as a location to simulate a hostage taking.

With annual revenues over \$500,000, the park is getting close to covering its operating costs without government assistance. But Mr. Cressman says if the park is to become wholly owned by Country Heritage Incorporated even more money will be required. He noted that the steel roofs alone are in need of repair at a cost of about \$72,000.

For Mr. Cressman, losing the site and its collection of over 200,000 artifacts is something that would be a tragedy. The park, which is ranked by museum experts as among the top five in North America, pro-

"WE OFFER A HISTORIC EDUCATIONAL MESSAGE TO PEOPLE IN THE GTA."

vides a place where an increasingly urban population can learn about agriculture. "We offer a historic, educational message to people in the GTA. They can look back over 200 to 250 years. These people don't know about the six inches of topsoil that sustains life."

When Mr. Cressman became general manager in 1998 the park was in a state of transition. "We had to get out of the box of the museum and focus on getting a product that customers would want."

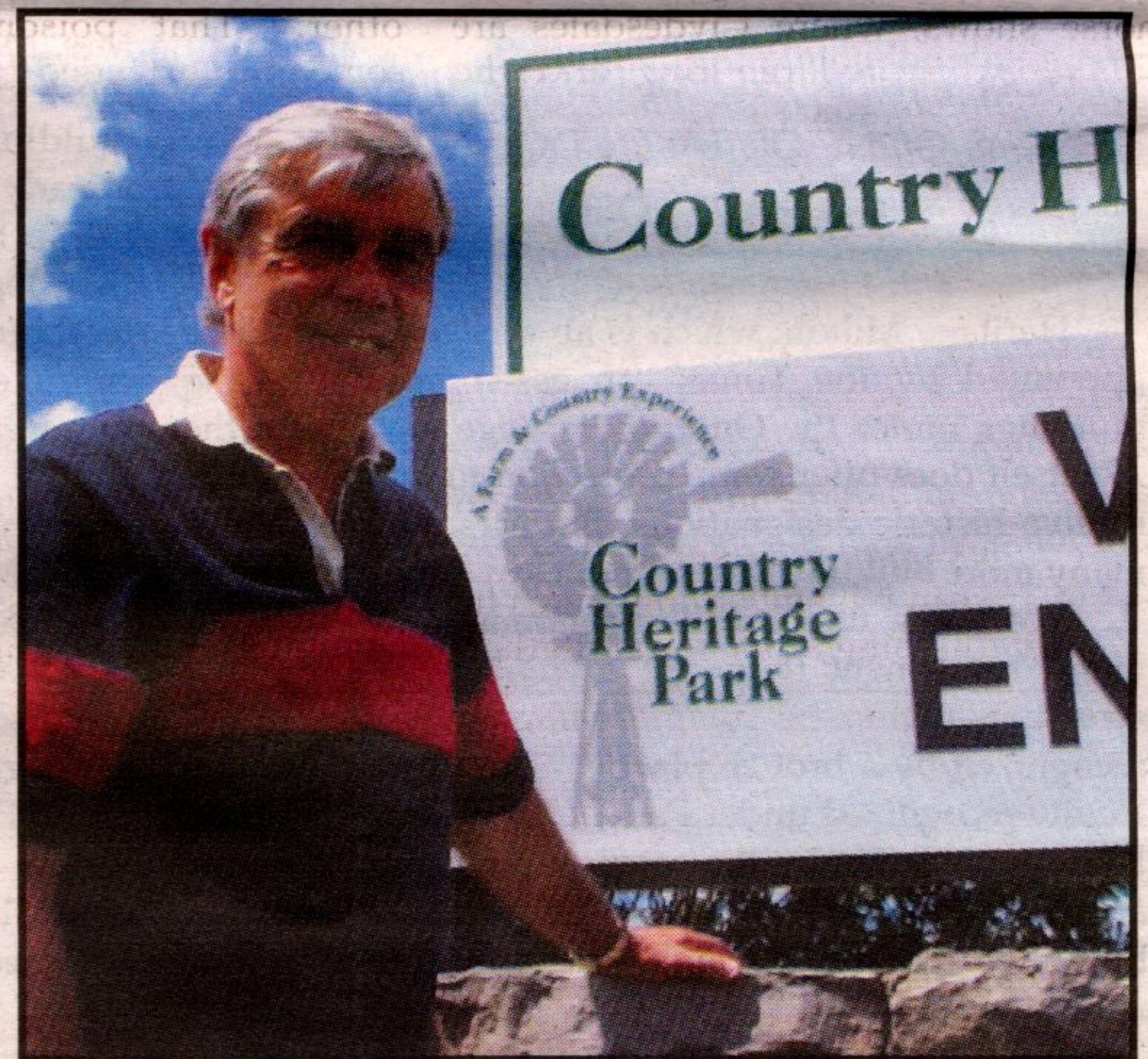


PHOTO BY JENNIFER ENRIGHT

This year should be an important one for Country Heritage Park as volunteers and staff prepare to negotiate with the provincial government about the park's survival. Reg Cressman, the park's general manager, says CHP will have to seek out support from the private sector to maintain the site without government assistance.

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