

Milton Historical Society to restore antique cutter

By JENNIFER ENRIGHT

Visiting Wallace Gray's garage in Milton is like stepping back into the Depression era. There you'll find two 1931 Cadillac Convertible Coupes and a 1930 Cadillac Sedan, all vehicles which Gray is in the process of restoring. And not far away is perhaps his most challenging project to date, a horse-drawn cutter dating from around 1860.

The cutter seems overpowered by the large vehicles that share the same space. It's a seemingly delicate antique that bears the distinctive marks of others of its kind: the long metal runners that rise into attractive curves; the broad base for added stability; the artistic flourishes on the sides of the wooden section of the cutter that

have a floral like pattern.

This year, Gray will begin the painstaking task of restoring this cutter on behalf of the Milton Historical Society (MHS) and eventually he says the cutter will be on permanent display at Waldie's Blacksmith Shop in Milton.

Gray is under no illusions about the difficulties that he will encounter when he restores the cutter. But he says the project is an important one, particularly as it relates to Milton's own history. The Milton Historical Society purchased the cutter at auction from the Chisholm family of Milton who had owned the cutter for many years. The cutter was designed and made by a Milton craftsman, Robert Hawthorn, who was a wagon, sleigh and cutter manufacturer as well as a blacksmith and horse-shoer. As Gray notes the cutter is unique to Milton. "Very few cutters have survived that have a Milton identity."

The cutter shows the unmistakable signs of age, but its eloquent and simple design is something that hasn't been marred by time. Nor has its beauty been lost on Gray. "He (Hawthorn) built a very artistic little cutter for what I believe would be a lady. Someone might have ordered it for a daughter or a bride or a sister."

Gray says most of the metal parts including the runner are sound, but the wood - most of which he says is ash - shows evidence of wet rot, dry rot, breakage and a modest degree of alteration. Then there's the elaborate patterned upholstery that's frayed and torn away from the seat.

The cutter is a masterpiece by a local-

ly known craftsman, who was prominent in the Milton community in the 1800s. According to Milton historian Jim Dills, Hawthorn came to Canada, then a British colony, from his native Ireland and he purchased property in Milton in the vicinity of Commercial Street and Pearl Street in 1853. It was in that area that he operated a blacksmith and wagon making shop. He lived with his family on Commercial Street where he and his wife Sarah Jane had nine children living according to the 1871 census.

Some aspects of the story about Hawthorn and the cutter he created are shrouded in mystery. Did Hawthorn work from a drawing or design when he was creating his cutter? Gray suspects that he did and he says it's possible he may uncover original drawings for the piece. As well, he's hoping to locate more details about the original upholstery and information on the missing top front piece of the sleigh.

Then there's the black paint used on the wooden sections of the cutter. Painting a cutter from that time period would have involved brush painting and it sounds relatively easy, but Gray says this aspect of the project is fraught with its own unique challenges. There's little information readily available, as he notes, on how paints were produced in the 1860s. He says he'll carefully research what type of paint would have been used so that he can remain as true to the original as possible.

Gray has many years experience restoring old vehicles, with the bulk of the restoration work being in refurbishing wooden interiors. It's a skill that he's become so adept at that he's regularly sought after by Canadians and Americans for his handiwork. It's attracted a lot of attention, something that surprises him since he sees his particular skills as a natural outcome of his interests and his years spent working as a draftsman, machinist and woodworker. For him it all comes down to something simple: "All I've ever done is put my spare time to good use. If I have a car that needs a new door post I simply make the door post."

Simple yes. But Gray, who turns 72 this September, admits he's spent years acquiring the necessary skills, ones that will no doubt be useful to him as he sets about restoring the cutter. His has been an apprenticeship in wood that has taken him on a journey back in time.

The journey for Gray began initially with his interest in cars, but these weren't just your average modern day cars or even those contemporary to the 1940s when he was a young man. These vehicles were comprised partly of wood, unlike their newer counterparts, and their undercarriage suggested their earlier antecedents: the sleighs and carriages of yesteryear. Their outsides might be sheathed in metal, but the insides were constructed of hardwood that was subject to rot. Out of necessity, he became experienced at what he calls "re-wooding" these vehicles.

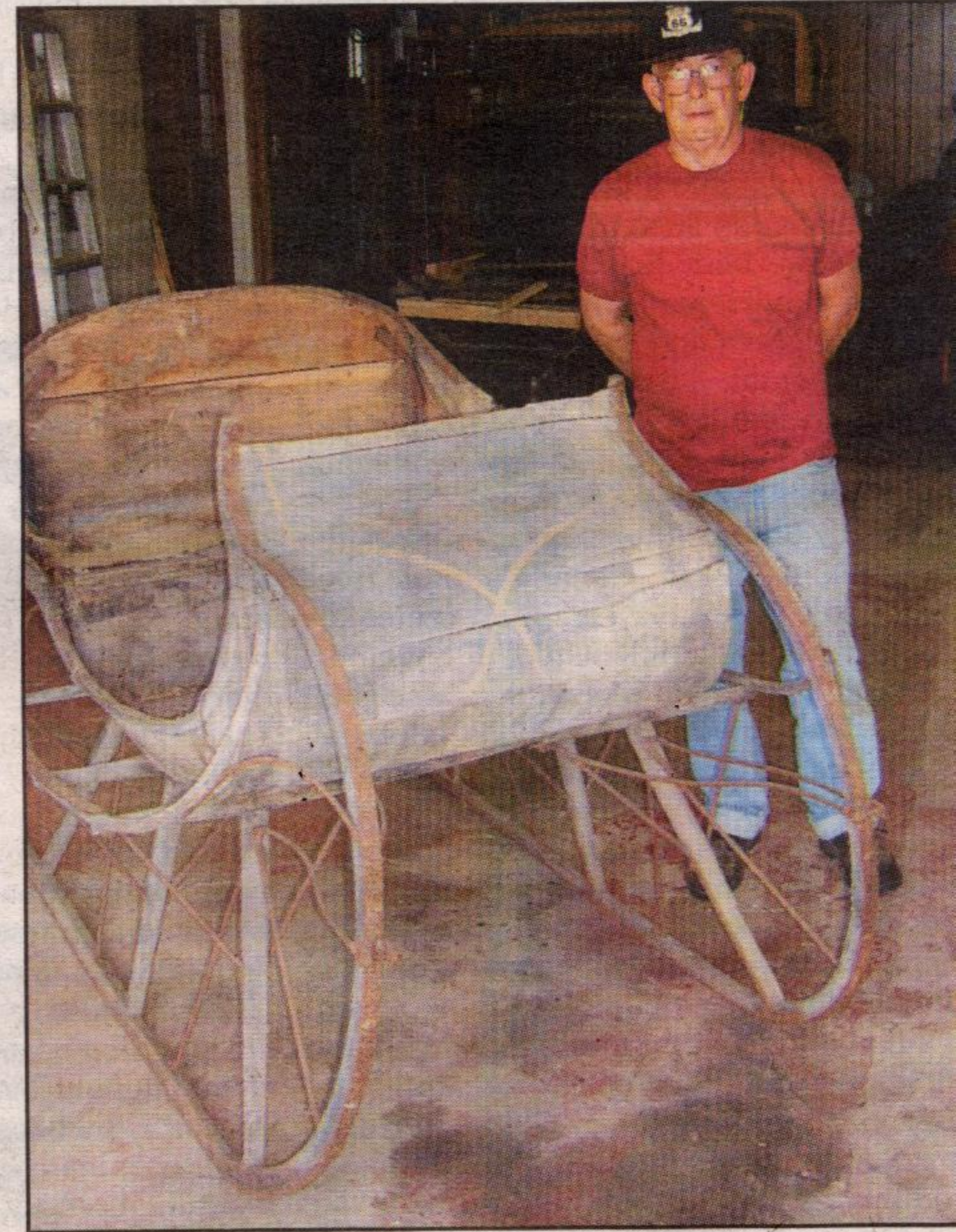


PHOTO BY JENNIFER ENRIGHT
Wallace Gray of Milton displays one of the few antique cutters known to exist in Milton. Gray is restoring the cutter on behalf of the Milton Historical Society and eventually the cutter will be on permanent display at Waldie's Blacksmith Shop.

While growing up on a farm in Erie Township, now the municipality of Erie, Gray purchased his first car. That was a major event in his life that he can recollect right down to the exact dollar amount and the details of the transaction itself. "My first was a 1927 Chevy Sedan," says Gray, whose parents once had a farm located at Lot 20, Concession 6 between the 17th and 22nd Sideroads. "I bought the car for \$31 in 1948. The individual who sold it to me wanted \$25 for the car, \$5 for what he considered virtually a new battery, one half of what he paid for it, and a dollar to transfer ownership. That's how we arrived at the \$31."

Years later in the early 1960s, Gray became seriously interested in antique cars as a hobby and since then he's attended many car shows including Georgetown's Classics Against Cancer. Beginning in the early 1970s, he worked full-time restoring antique automobiles until the market dried up a decade later. "By then the North American economy would no longer support my occupation because of high interest rates," says Gray who says he simply returned to the industrial sector as a machinist. "People didn't want to put \$100,000 into a car when they could get 20 per cent on their money in the bank."

Today, now that Gray is retired, he's still working on restoring old vehicles for clients. But the cutter is a special challenge for him.

Cornelius Kriehoff, the well-known artist who painted Quebec scenes in the 1800s, depicted many sleighs in his paintings of the period. And in the 1900s Canadian illustrator Carlo Italiano would lovingly recreate the street scenes of his youth in a book entitled, "The Sleighs of My Childhood." In the 1920s and 1930s Montreal was a city that virtually became dominated by sleighs in the wintertime as a mode of transport.

In Gray's own childhood, sleighs were essential during the colder months as well especially in the days when roads weren't ploughed. Cutters were in general use then as well as farm sleighs.

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