

Town opens its heart to Armenian orphans

A little known slice of Georgetown's history is tied up with the almost forgotten tragedy that brought 109 Armenian orphans to what is now Cedarvale Community Centre, more than 50 years ago.

The story, known to longtime residents in the town, but a revelation to the newer ones, has been told by Jack Apramian, one of the scared orphans who landed here half-starved in a flight from the Greco-Turkish wars in 1922.

His book, entitled *The Georgetown Boys*, is a private publication of 500 copies and belongs to the unique fraternity, the Georgetown Armenian Boys Association. The boys, now gray-haired and in their 60s, landed in this alien country, unable to speak a word of English, on Canada's birthday, July 1, 1923.

They had witnessed terrors where the Christian Armenians were persecuted by the Turks, and made to flee the country. Their large, dark eyes had seen fathers shot, or hanged, and families starved.

After a train journey, packed standing up in cattle cars, prodded by whips and bayonet points, according to the book, they were loaded into the hold of a freighter and landed at the Greek island of Corfu.

The author, known then as Hagop Aprahamian, fell deathly ill in the island camp, where water and sanitation were virtually nonexistent. Sadly, his mother turned him over to an orphanage run by Lord Mayor of London Fund, in an effort to save his life.

In the summer of 1923, the first 50 boys arrived at Cedarvale Farm, through the efforts of the Armenian Relief Fund of Canada, spurred by Dr. A. J. Vining, a Toronto clergyman, and the old Toronto Globe.

Thousands of dollars were raised through the fund, and with help from many influential members on the committee, convinced the Canadian government to relax the stringent immigration policies to allow the Armenian boys to come to Canada on a combined farming and education program.

The boys, strangers to Canadian food, devoured it, even if it was not to their taste at first, and could not believe there was no reason to hide some away for another day. Porridge proved to be a problem for the boys, who like many Canadian boys, did not find it too appetizing.

A bigger problem was when the boys spoke no English and no one on staff spoke Armenian. The problem was solved when young bilingual teacher Aris Alexanian was brought to the home, to the relief of Farm Superintendent Rev. J. W. Dorcas and his family.

The next batch of boys arrived in 1924, forcing the Farm and Home Committee to look for more staff. Miss J. G. Adams and Miss Ethel Kenny became regular teachers at the school.

During all the years, people became involved with the farm, now known as the Armenian Boys Farm. Many women helped darn socks and mend torn pants, while merchants frequently donated goods, or offered them at a discount.

In an attempt at Canadianizing the boys, some of their names were changed, resulting in some unusual combinations, like Sarkiss Brock.

Eventually, some of the boys rebelled at the name changes, pointing out their names were all they had of their long Armenian heritage. "My father and mother gave me this name," one cried, "I want to keep it."

The teaching of Armenian by Aris Alexian was questioned by members of the committee who felt that full time should be concentrated on English. Only Levon Babayan, a prominent Toronto Armenian on the committee urged they continue learning their own language as well.

The older boys were placed in farm homes with the condition they must be allowed to continue their schooling until at least 16 years of age. A few older Armenian girls were brought over at this time, but were placed directly into domestic service.

In the spring of 1927, the department of immigration gave permission for the entry of another 100 orphans, but they never arrived. The reason was never clear, but Apramian suggested in the book that it was the result of petty squabbling.

The home was transferred to the United Church and it was run as a home for girls until the late 1960s. As a Centennial project, the Town of Georgetown bought the buildings and land for a community centre.

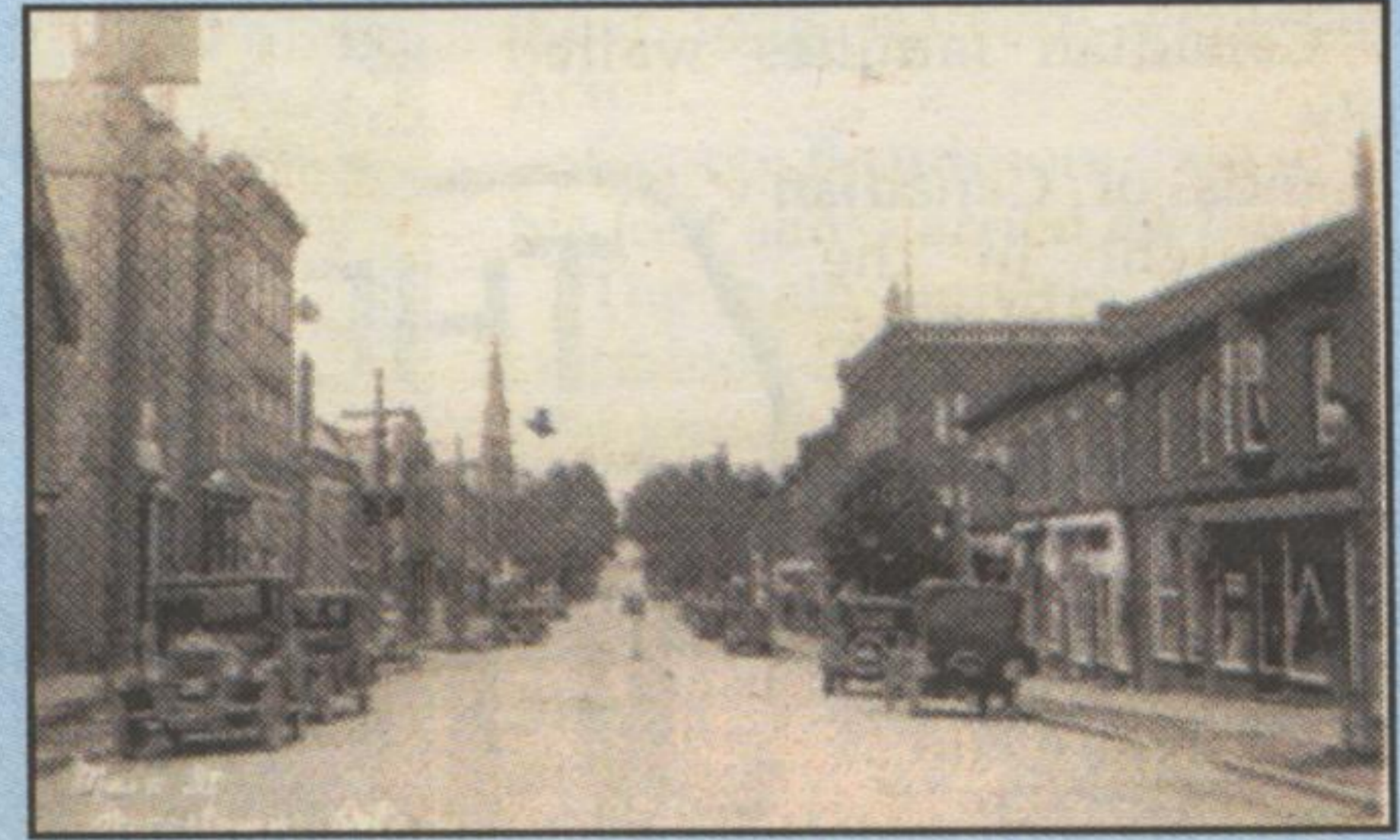
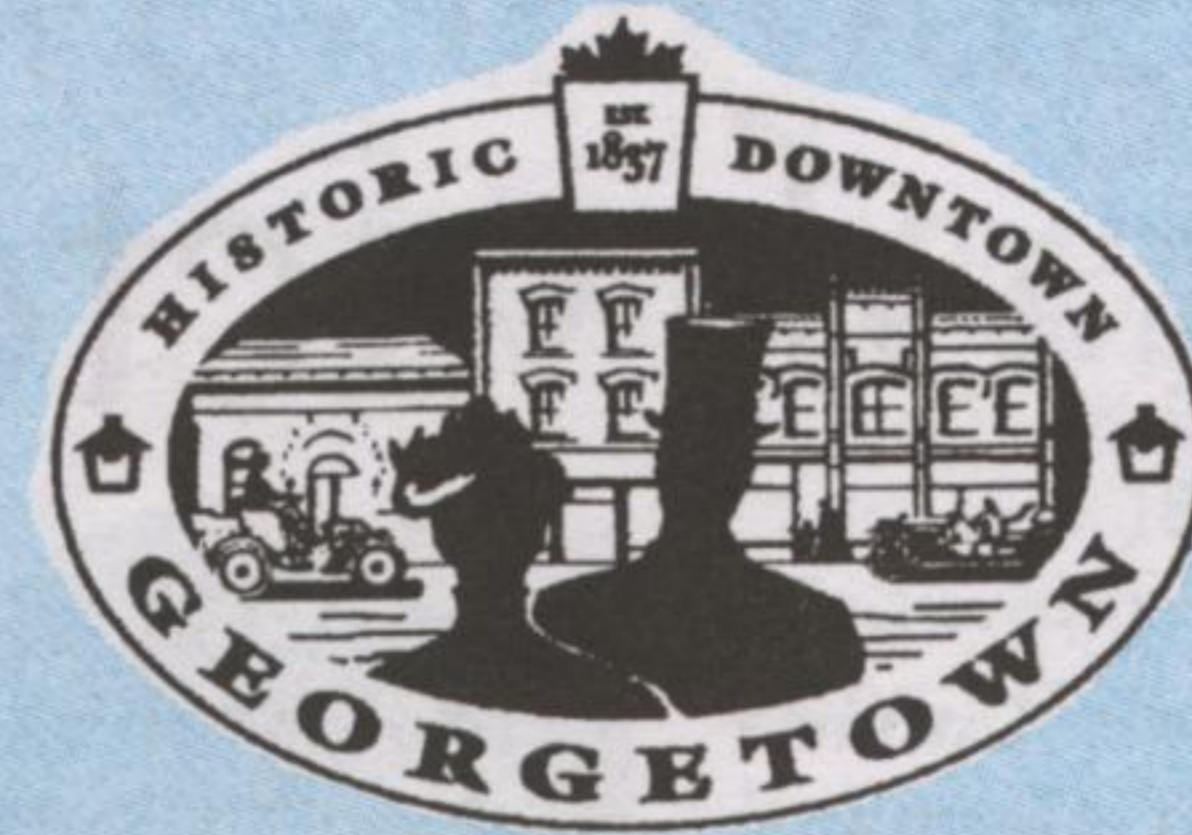
In 1973, the boys staged a 50th anniversary reunion at their former farm home. They wandered moist-eyed around the buildings recalling who slept where.

Apramian explained to the children and grandchildren of the boys that the present cottage was the infirmary, while the caretaker's house was used by the supervisor of the farm.

Cedarvale farm gave the 109 boys their first security in a terrifying world, and the boys have repaid Canada a hundredfold.

As Apramian puts it, "They worked and prospered as the nation prospered. None of them became millionaires, but not one of them ever lived on welfare."

—Taken from the June 16, 1976 *Georgetown Independent*

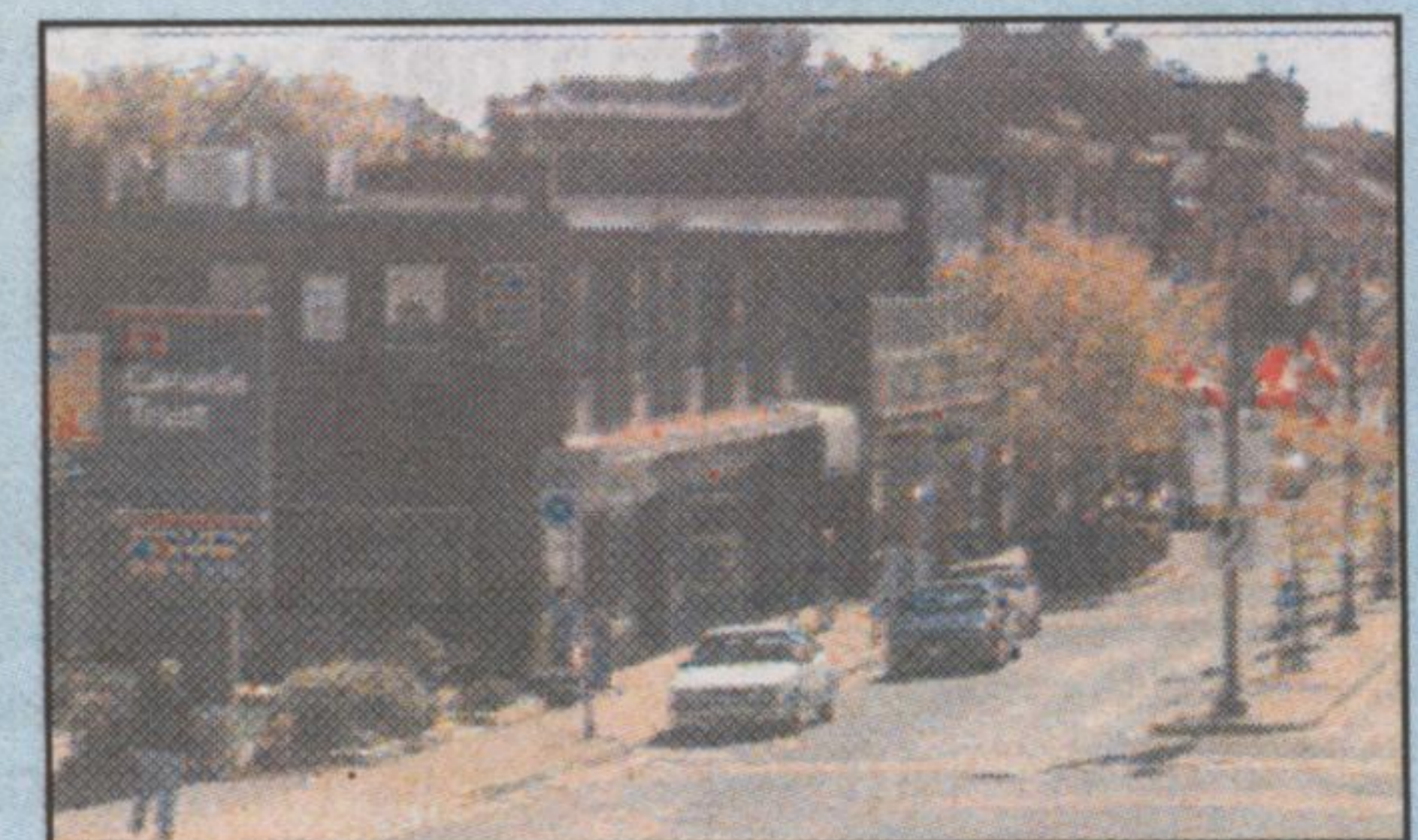


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