



Champion COMMUNITY Page



A chilling glimpse into a peaceful park's past

Hanging was a public spectacle

By **STEVE LeBLANC**
Special to *The Champion*

Victoria Park is beautiful, scenic and peaceful. Children use it for summertime activity. Couples pass through it on evening strolls. Families frequent it for weekend picnics and holiday concerts.

It has a playground, gorgeous flowers and a lush green lawn ideal for community events. Nestled in the heart of downtown Milton, next to Town Hall, Victoria Park holds as much splendour and appeal as any site in any small town.

It also holds a somewhat macabre past — not completely erased by 100-plus years of social change and moral evolution.

If neighboring walls could talk, they'd have some bone-chilling stories to tell that are every bit as frightening, yet fascinating as a Stephen King novel or John Carpenter flick.

They're the stories of three men from different walks of life, who were each put to death on the Town Hall's front lawn.

Like most small communities in the late 1800s, Milton carried out capital punishment in the form of public hangings.

And much like their ancestors from that century, who could not stay away from these public spectacles, current Miltonians find these stories as interesting as they do troubling.

No one knows this better than local historian Jim Dills. A founding member of the Milton Historical Society, he included details of these hangings on a recent walking tour at Victoria Park during the group's 20th anniversary.

"These events are definitely a window to the past and speak of the kind of justice we had in those days," Mr. Dills explained. "It (Victoria Park) is a scene of contrast. It has elements of memory both benign and macabre."

Mr. Dills has documented two of the three known hangings in his book *Moments in History, Reflections of Halton's County Town 1833 - 1864*.

Hangings documented

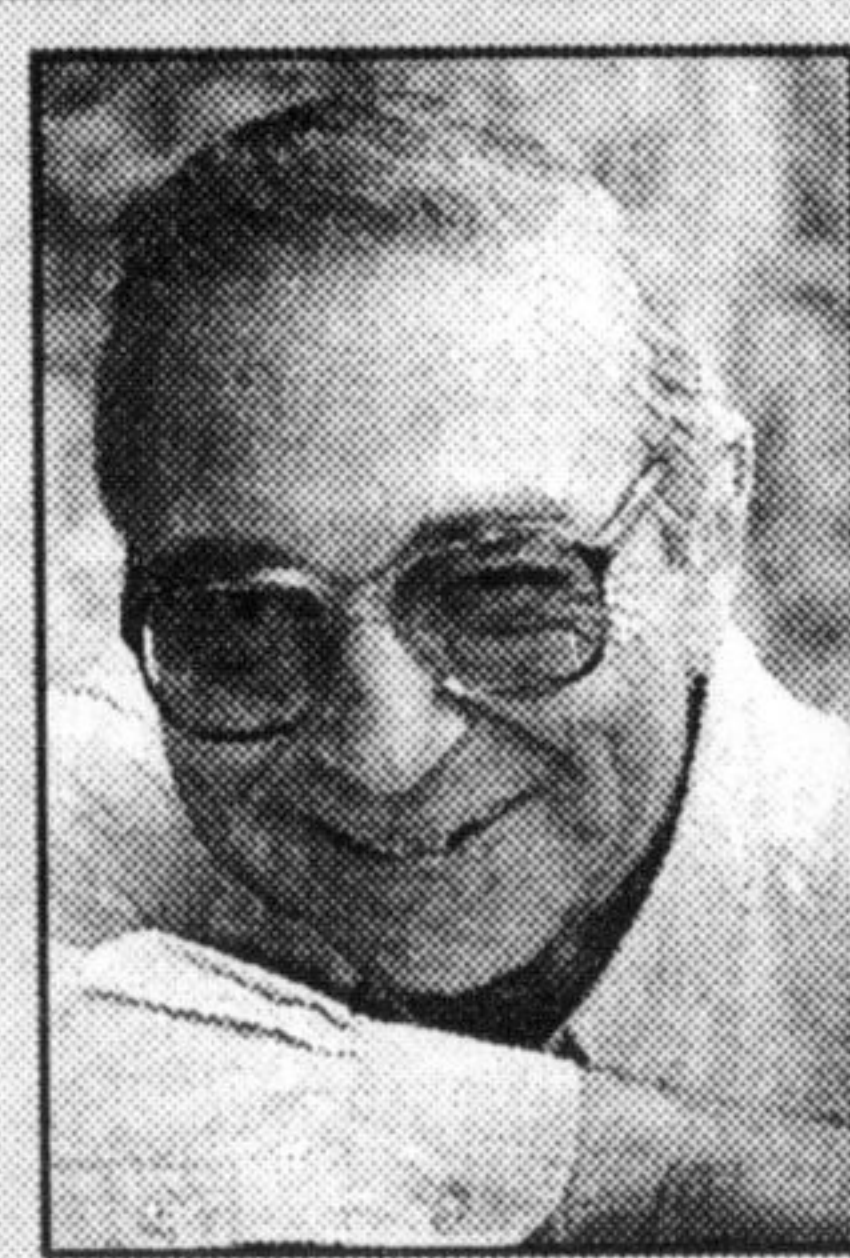
While his passages are descriptive and highly interesting, he said they're simply the tip of the iceberg in terms of detail — with just enough "to wet one's appetite."

"I found these events one of the most interesting areas of the town's history when researching the book. They're one of the most popular parts of walking tours as well."

Milton's first two public hangings — covered in *The Canadian Champion* and *Hamilton Spectator* respectively — occurred four years apart in 1858 and 1862. Both took place in the middle of Victoria Park, attracted huge crowds and were punishment for murder.

Alcohol played a significant role in the cases as well. The first condemned man had reportedly lived on whisky for many years while the second committed his terrible crime while intoxicated.

That however, is where the similarities end.



"I got into more of it than I expected. These are pretty stark stories and the three men come to life in the mind's eye when you read enough about them."

HISTORIAN JIM DILLS

The first man was 63 years old. The second was not yet 19. The first shot his wife and niece with a derringer-type pistol. The second beat his mother to death while the two were drunk.

The older man — of strong upbringing and good breeding — made a bold journey to the scaffold and proclaimed his innocence to the bitter end.

The teenager — who had an alcoholic mother and abusive father — required medication to maintain even a faint trace of calmness and his last words were ones of remorse.

The third — and perhaps final — known hanging took place in 1883. It occurred behind the jail wall, and although not as public as the other two was far from private.

The condemned man was convicted of murdering an old man and his daughter.

Stark stories

"I got into more of it than I expected. These are pretty stark stories and the three men come to life in the mind's eye when you read enough about them," said Mr. Dills.

These hangings, he recounted, would draw hundreds of spectators including women and children. While designed to act as a deterrent, the mood was often upbeat, with many area residents using the event as an opportunity for socializing.

Mr. Dills explained that the executions — carried out with much more expediency than is seen in the United States today — were usually done by black men for as little as a few dollars.

Racial prejudice played a big part in that. "It was not a white man's occupation in those days," he said. "I've researched other Canadian hangings, and some of them were carried out with very little concern for the accused. Ropes were often not tied properly, the condemned person's neck wouldn't break and they would suffer for several minutes before dying."

Modern mayor bears witness

Another Miltonian whose had a direct link with the town's dark past is longtime Mayor Gord Krantz.

He witnessed an "archeological dig" in the early 80's, before Town Hall renovations could be started. "We wanted to make

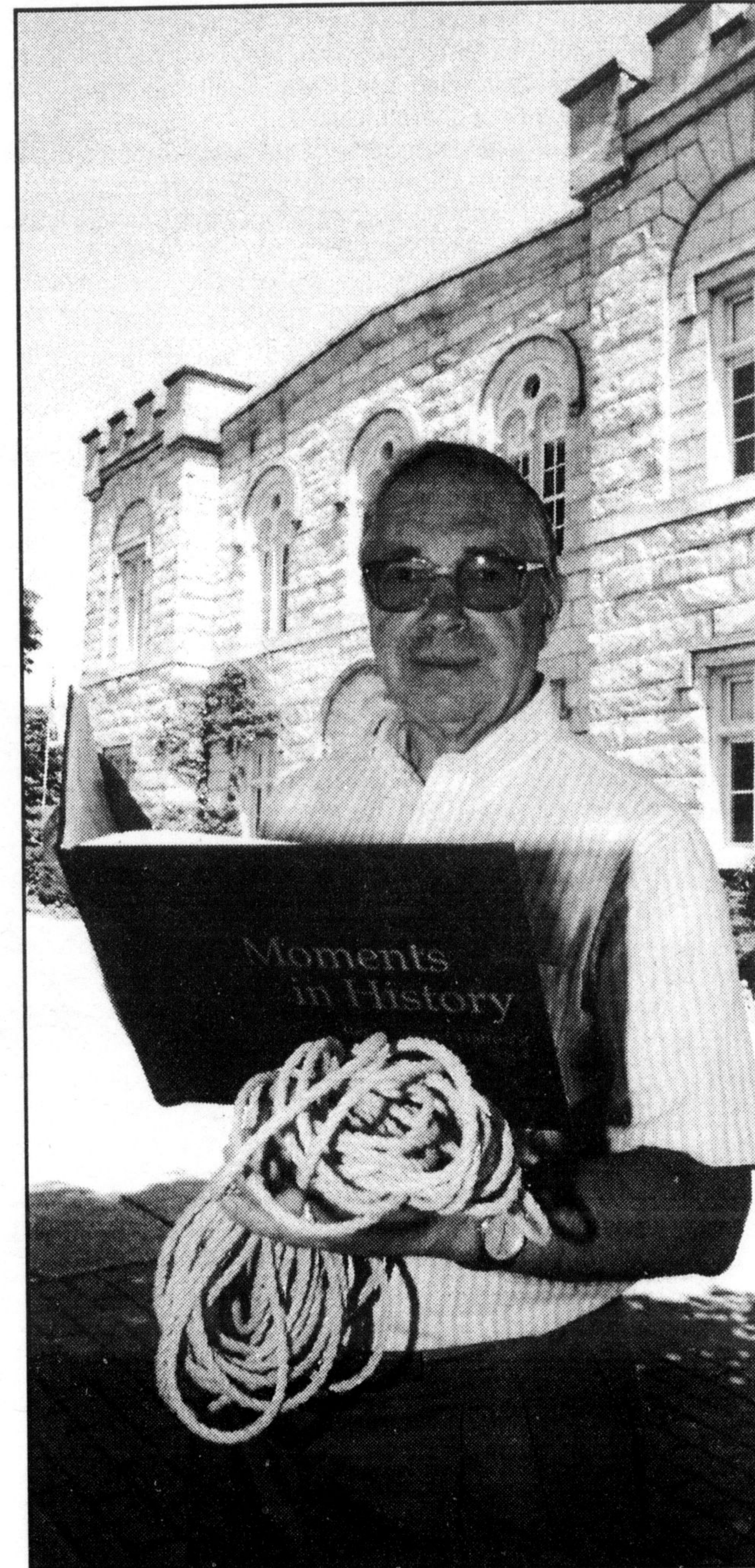


Photo by Graham Paine

Jim Dills, noted local historian and author of *Moments in History, Reflections on Halton's County Town, 1833 to 1864*, says he and most Miltonians get hung up on executions at Town Hall once they find out about them.

sure there were no bodies buried there. Under federal law, these men would have to have a proper burial so we had to go through the process.

"We brought in a university professor for several digs, but no bodies were found," Mr. Krantz recalled.

He still finds it hard to believe — as most do today — that these public hangings took place only 100 years ago and that people came from far away to witness them.

"It's a little barbaric to say the least, but that was the order of the day."

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