

Escarpment trees have been alive since before Christopher Columbus

By NORMAN NELSON

University of Guelph professor Doug Larson points out that he didn't discover the ancient eastern white cedar trees growing on Milton's Niagara Escarpment.

Indeed, over the years, thousands of motorists driving by on Highway 401 have seen them clinging tenaciously to life.

"Everyone in Milton knows about them," he said.

Ironically, as a youngster growing up in Oakville, he first came into contact with the trees during numerous hikes he made to the Milton area of the escarpment.

What he did recently discover, he corrected, was the importance behind the seemingly innocuous, gnarled dwarf-like survivors — that they're old. The oldest trees in Ontario.

Some were around years before Christopher Columbus discovered North America.

One tree, through an analysis of its growth rings, was determined to be more than 500 years old. "But that's not the oldest," he quickly interjected.

On one of his specimens, where a portion of the trunk was hollowed out, using a rather complicated procedure designed to accurately fill in the missing rings, the age was determined to be 853 years.

However, the escarpment trees still have a few more years to go before catching up to the oldest trees in the world — the Bristle Cone Pines in Northern California and Nevada, thought to be approximately 5,000 years old.

Professor Larson first made his discovery at the Kelso Conservation Area in 1988 while researching cliff vegetation.

His research had shown the fragile system of the escarpment cliff was being damaged from human activity, particularly along the nearby Bruce Trail and in conservation areas.

A story in the April/May *Canadian Geographic* magazine on the old growth forest suggested that the trees may not survive such human traffic.

However, Bruce Trail Association executive director Doug Robertson thought this part of the article was a bit misleading, although he was highly complimentary of the piece overall.

According to Professor Larson,



Photos by JOHN WARREN
The cedar trees that can be seen clinging to the edge of the Niagara Escarpment around Rattlesnake Point and Kelso aren't as young as their small stature would indicate. It was recently revealed that they're actually hundreds of years old.

both may be right.

While the much-travelled areas may be losing their regenerative capacity, the botany professor ironically pointed out his research shows the old trees may actually fare better because of less competition from the other plants.

In any event, the dilemma is not as important as it once was, now that a study carried out last summer by Professor Larson and some graduate students has found the old growth forest not just in Mil-

ton, where it was first discovered, but throughout the escarpment.

In fact, he quipped that "paving a road" into one of the areas to allow even more access might be an ideal solution as it would reduce the need for human interference on other less travelled parts of the escarpment.

The ancient trees, he said, basically extend the width of the Niagara Escarpment, with two exceptions — Niagara Falls and Hamilton. In those areas the trees

were destroyed by efforts to prop up the escarpment.

He determined the trees had originally been there through archival photographs which showed patterns similar to present growth.

When made aware of the significance of the trees, the Halton Region Conservation Authority (HRCA) took a first hand look to see whether any activities — such as hiking and rock climbing — posed a danger to them.

"We wanted to see if there was an immediate threat," said Sandy Bell of the HRCA. "The odd time we talked with Professor Larson, concern had been expressed that some of the trees were being damaged in different ways."

While assured that the trees are not close enough to any high-use areas to be "loved to death or vandalized," he stressed the conservation authority would be vigilant to prevent any future encroachment.

He said the discovery has already sparked interest among people hoping to glimpse the tiny specimens that have lasted centuries, and he hopes that it will inspire people to an even greater interest in the environment.

While Professor Larson expressed similar sentiments, he said the old trees may also have a more practical scientific application.

"All sorts of scientists are trying to determine the magnitude of the greenhouse effect," he said. "One problem is we have such a short period of weather records, only going back over the last 100 years."

Teacher acquitted

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some of his comments to students failed to show respect for them.

Assistant Crown Attorney Laurie Vechter argued that Mr. Nelson stretched the limits of propriety well beyond accepted norms. His attitude was that he "can go as far as he can until he is stopped. He took liberties he's not entitled to take," said the Crown.

Nancy Grisoni, a teaching assistant at the high school, said one of the complainants "would get upset over things that didn't happen or exist."

The identities of the five young women were shielded by court order.

Housing registry goal to alleviate problem

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"Both home owners and renters can benefit from the rental income that home sharing provides."

Miss Querques said landlords with vacancies and Halton residents seeking housing are matched through a computerized data base.

"It saves landlords time and money," she added. "They don't have to interview 600 people to find the one they like."

Service to clients includes a free information package, consultation and matching. After filling out a form identifying their needs, people seeking housing are referred to a vacancy. The rest is worked out between landlord and tenant.

The service attempts to "contribute some solutions to the housing crisis," said Miss Querques. "Quality matches are sought and confidentiality is respected."

Funded by the provincial Ministry of Community and Social Services and the Region of Halton, the registry is run out of Milton Community and Information Services at the Optimist Centre.

Modelled after a similar registry in Burlington, the program serves Milton, Acton and Georgetown. An open house will be held June 21.

If interested in becoming a landlord or if you are in need of housing, call the North Halton Housing Registry at 875-3822.

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