

Oakville: There's something special about being a town



Feeding the fowl at Gairloch Gardens — a scene typical of the quiet, cosy "town" of Oakville.

Photo by JIM McKELVIE

By MICHAEL SHAPCOTT

Why, someone asked recently, is Oakville, with a population of 68,116, still just a town?

After all, it was pointed out, there are many Ontario municipalities one-third Oakville's size or less which proudly call themselves cities.

Indeed, many towns and townships strain to become cities, figuring the very title "City of . . ." confers some type of sophistication and swankness unavailable to a mere town.

The answer is tied up in the whole image of Oakville — a rather nebulous vision but one that is nevertheless deeply cherished by many of its residents.

Cosy community

Oakville has kept the label town because of the visions that word summons up: A cosy little community, friendly townfolk, quiet and civilized streets and lots of neighborly attitudes.

While cities to the east and west have strained to grow and add scores of high-rise apartments, Oakville has resisted and, with a few exceptions, keeps new development at a relatively slow growth.

One hundred and fifty years ago Oakville's founding father William Chisholm paid \$4,116 for 960 acres of land around the mouth of the Sixteen Mile Creek.

Thirty years later, on March 27, 1857 (which is 120 years ago almost to this day), Oakville was incorporated as a town with 2,000 residents.

Since then Oakville has burst to the west and swallowed the former village of Bronte (which now accounts for almost half of the town population) and to the north to include the former Township of Trafalgar — all the while

trying to stay a town even though it has the people and trappings to be a full-fledged city.

Without dispute Oakville's heart is the harbor and area around the Sixteen Mile Creek where William Chisholm first established himself. The very name Oakville comes from the title White Oak that the Indians gave to Chisholm, presumably because he was a wood merchant.

Today almost 17,000 people live in Old Oakville, roughly the area from the lakefront to the Queen Elizabeth Way and from Appleby College to Morrison Creek.

Its residents are the rich and powerful who inhabit the Lakeshore Road mansions — the wealthy and important from Canadian business and politics, as well as a growing ethnic neighborhood around Kerr Street with its distinctive stores and activities.

Southwest Oakville, which includes the former village of Bronte, runs west of Appleby College to the town boundary and from the lake to the Queen Elizabeth Way. Slightly more than 27,000 people make their home in west Oakville, a sprawling suburban area which sports its own mansions and a harbor which, with recent property purchases, has become a major recreation area.

East Lake, the community from Morrison Creek east to the town boundary and from the lake to the QEW, is a rapidly-growing mix of old and new homes. Approximately 9,400 people call East Lake home, and many more will do so soon as the town progresses with plans for the massive Clearview neighborhood.

The newest section of Oakville and the area which will see the most growth in the next few years, is north of the Queen Elizabeth Way. The more established part — College Park — is to the west of Trafalgar Road and sports Oakville's institution of higher learning, Sheridan College,

as well as 9,300 residents. To the east is Iroquois Ridge with just over 4,000 residents.

While the northern section, which is home to Oakville's town hall, fights for more of the services and amenities that the southern communities already enjoy, the north also faces a major development in the Glen Abbey community just north of the QEW and west of the Sixteen Mile Creek. Pressure is on by developers to open up land farther north of the existing subdivisions.

Oakville is still a mostly rural municipality, with active farming continuing within town boundaries. There are 1,346 rural residents.

Oakville's identity is very much fixed with Toronto. Many town residents, most of them white collar workers and executives, work in the city. Oakville lacks many of the recreation and shopping facilities normal for a municipality this size due to its close proximity to the city and city services.

Sense of pride

But a bare recital of the facts doesn't add up to Oakville's image. It is something that is deeply ingrained in many residents — a strong sense of pride in the community and a desire, almost a passion, to keep the town, especially Old Oakville, a town.

There is a strong sense of belonging among Oakville's people and even the town's newer residents, the ones who weren't born and bred in town, can feel that dignified respect, almost a swagger, that comes from being from Oakville.

Town politicians, planners and many residents are aware of the something special about Oakville and though they cannot force or manipulate it, they consciously are trying to preserve Oakville as a town.