

Family history interest led to historical society

By KATE GILDERDALE

Ruth Burkholder, a founder of the Whitchurch-Stouffville Historical Society, came by her interest in a roundabout way.

"History was not one of my better subjects," Ruth laughs. "After I left school, I used to read historical novels and I learned a lot more history from them than I ever did in high school."

It wasn't until she started researching her own family history that her fascination grew.

"My dad was the 13th of 15 children," she says. "He was 56 when I was born. It wasn't until long after he died I realized I had no way of finding out about my family history unless I wrote to a cousin I had met in England."

Her cousin sent information on his mother's family.

But with three young children to bring up and a part-time teaching job, it was years before Ruth acted on the information.

"I didn't have the time, the inclination or know-how to follow up then," she notes.

Re-kindled interest

Her interest was re-kindled while she was living in Caledon. The Women's Institute of which she was a member attended an Ontario Genealogical Society convention.

"That's where I got interested in doing something with the letter I had received 10 or more years earlier," she recalls. She began to get an idea of how to study her own family history.

When her mother-in-law died, Ruth's father-in-law passed on to her a family bible.

"He told me he'd like me to fill it in, but he didn't know what to put in it."

Using the knowledge she'd gained from investigating her own family, she started work on her husband's.

Her efforts led her to become a member of the local branch of the genealogical society in Brampton.

"From that I started getting interested in the history of the area," Ruth explains. "Caledon East decided to start its own historical society, and I was asked to be a charter member. I found I was getting more interested in local history while continuing my research into the Burkholder family."

She developed a keen interest in Whitchurch because of her work on her husband Howard's family.

Family interest

"I found myself more interested in the families in the area where they moved and what they did. The family histories were so tied up with general local history."

Her research showed there was no history of Whitchurch and no one to turn to for answers for her questions.

When the Burkholders moved to Stouffville in 1986, Ruth began to contact people in the area to learn more about its beginnings.

"As Howard's wife, I wasn't really a stranger here. I knew people and they knew who I was," she says, pointing out that they had been frequent visitors to their present home when it was owned by Howard's grandparents and later one of his aunts.

She got in touch with local historian Jean Barkey who drew her attention to an article in the newspaper about the need for a historical society in town.

Since Ward 6 councillor Jim Sanders had believed such an organization was vital to keep the town records alive, Ruth got in touch with him, and he agreed to help set up a meeting.

"He phoned around and four of us held a meeting in March, 1987," she remembers. The other two were Vic Sanders and Brian Milsip.

Group needed

The meeting concluded that a historical group was needed in the area, and a further meeting was planned.

Jean Barkey and librarian George Schlukbier were invited to attend the meeting and the group also had Caledon's Heritage Resource Officer speak about setting up a society.

On April 8, 1987, another meet-

ing was held, at which it was unanimously decided a historical society should be set up.

A steering committee was formed after a public meeting was held at the end of May.

The group decided to meet on the fourth Wednesday of every other month.

"For each meeting, we try to find a subject and see if we can hold it at an appropriate location," Ruth says. A meeting on Quakers was held at a former Quaker church at Pine Orchard.

They attracted 65 people from all the historical societies in the area when they invited Ron Stagg from Ryerson Polytechnical Institute to talk about the 1837 rebellion.

Family picnic

Although the group doesn't hold meetings during the summer, members are planning a family picnic on Sunday, July 17 at the County Heritage Museum in Uxbridge, with a tour of the museum as part of the outing.

The Whitchurch-Stouffville Historical Society now boasts 41 members and is an affiliated member of the Ontario Historical Society. Ruth finds this gratifying, particularly since the local

group has only existed for a short time.

Annual dues are \$5 and anyone interested in local history is invited to join.

In addition to her interest in the society, Ruth works as a freelance writer for The Tribune and is a member of St. James Presbyterian Church. Born and brought up in Toronto, she met Howard when she was a teacher boarding at his parents' home in Bethesda.

In Stouffville two years

They married in 1964 and spent a year in Toronto before moving to Richmond Hill. After seven years, they bought a house in Caledon, and then moved to Stouffville two years ago when Howard's aunt moved into Parkview Village.

Ruth enjoys living in different types of houses, having moved from a brand new house to the old family home on Second Street.

"I've always wanted to have lots of money so that I could move every three years to something totally different," she laughs. "I'd like to try a mansion next, then maybe a log house."

In the meantime, Ruth has plenty to keep her busy.



Members of the Bethesda Women's Institute recently visited Parklane Nurseries to enjoy the scenery. Pictured are Margaret Epringham (kneeling); (standing, left to right) — Anna Kapteijn, Leila Whitcombe, Elsie Miller, Irene Epringham, Jean Kirby, Grace Pugh, Connie Yake, Effie Baker and Jean Yake.

— Chris Garbutt

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