

Locals helped in Markham fire fight

Stouffville firefighters helped the Markham Fire Department battle a spectacular lumber yard fire July 5. Markham just didn't have enough water.

Stouffville sent out its tanker truck to provide extra water for a brush fire on 19th Ave. From there, the firefighters could see smoke billowing from the fire at Hwy 7 and 10th Line.

Markham called for assistance to the second fire at Markham Building Centre. Tankers also came from Pickering to help out.

The fire departments operate on a mutual aid system, in which neighboring municipalities send any available trucks that are needed.

Aid also came from a private hauler, who provided firefighters with water early on in the blaze.

Markham fire officials confirmed Thursday that a sawdust collector was ignited by a spark, triggering the fire.

Firefighters also peg the damage at more than \$500,000 in the midday blaze.

Markham Fire Chief Ken Beckett said the fire likely started when packaging staples embedded in wooden planks emitted sparks when run through a band saw.

The saw caught onto the staples and the spark carried into the sawdust collector.

Firefighters fought the blaze for seven hours before extinguishing it. The fire destroyed two buildings, a \$150,000 saw, a truck and some of the lumber yard's stock.

Local crews also had to fight a small fire at a house north of the building centre, and used the owner's pool as another source of water to fight isolated grass fires around the site.

Senior chatted with the Queen in bygone days

By KATE GILDERDALE
Parkview resident Helen McEwen has a rich store of memories of her life, which began 96 years ago in Scotland.

Her early years were spent at Dartford, Kent in England where her mother worked as a nurse in a large house.

"We lived in the lodge," recalls Mrs. McEwen. "I used to watch the big carriages coming through the gate."

One of her earliest memories, at the age of three or four, is of attending a garden party held for Queen Victoria.

"She was very little and stout," smiles Mrs. McEwen. "She was

stepping down from her carriage, and I said to my mother, 'What little feet that lady's got!'"

The Queen overheard her and replied, "Little girl, I have little feet and little hands too. I need them to hold on to so much."

The family returned to Scotland when Mrs. McEwen was 10. Her interest in music was sparked when she was enrolled in her grandfather's music academy in Edinburgh, where she learned to sing.

When she was 11, she worked as a weaver to supplement the family income.

"I worked one day and went to school the next," she remembers. "I earned 10 shillings (about one dollar) a week, working from 6 a.m. to 6 p.m. on weekdays and 6 a.m. to noon on Saturdays."

At the age of 16, she started working full time in a shop. She married when she was 21 and had a daughter the following year.

Golf buff

When she was living in Dundee, Scotland, Mrs. McEwen saw Lady Elizabeth Bowes-Lyon, the future queen mother, on a number of occasions.

"She would come into Dundee to do some shopping and when she passed by she would wave," she states. "She went to the agricultural shows, too, and I often saw her there."

On one occasion, Mrs. McEwen and a friend were playing golf at Carnoustie, on the coast.

"A yellow fog came swirling in," she says. They were about to cross a small bridge over a river when someone took hold of her coat and told her not to cross because it was too foggy. "It was the Prince of Wales," she recalls.

She closed her shop when the war started and worked as an auxiliary nurse treating wounded soldiers.

"We saw some awful sights in 1914," she said. "I didn't see much of my husband, who was sent out to India and didn't get home for months at a time."

After the war, she gave birth to a son, and the couple had a total of eight children of whom only five survived to adulthood.

"They didn't have vaccination then," Mrs. McEwen noted. "I lost two children to measles at six months and 18 months of age."

The couple didn't come to Canada until 1959.

"By then, we had no family left in Britain," she explains. "My oldest son was the first to come. He was offered a job with CCM over here."

Things went so well for him that the rest of the family gradually followed him, prompting their parents to do the same.

"After five years, my husband wanted to go home again," notes Mrs. McEwen. They went back and had been there only five days when he suffered a fatal heart attack. He was 73 years old.

Returned here

Although she considered staying in Britain, Mrs. McEwen didn't want to be so far from her family and decided to come back to Canada.

She returned to Weston, settling at Eagle Manor Apartments, and became friendly with a woman from England who had been in a choir. After hearing Mrs. McEwen sing, she suggested they start one of their own.

It was the beginning of the Eagle Manor Choir, which grew to 26 members over the years.

"We got a grant from the government," declares Mrs. McEwen.

She was part of the choir for 12 years, until she broke her hip in an accident. Her youngest daughter, Agnes, suggested she move into her house in Stouffville.

When Agnes and her husband decided to take a holiday, Helen agreed to move into Parkview for a month.

"I liked it so much, I decided to stay," she declares. "It's a grand place. They'll do anything for you. They don't bother you or push you around."

She sometimes sings for the Parkview residents, leading off with such familiar lines as "I'd like to teach the world to sing," and "When you're smiling."

Happy views

Mrs. McEwen has an optimistic view of life. "When I was at the Eagle Manor drop-in centre with my friend," she recalls, "someone asked if she could share our table and I said yes, as long as you don't talk about pills or aches and pains," she laughs.

The Ladies of the Eagle Manor Choir sent a card to Mrs. McEwen on her birthday, signed by all the members, asking her to go back and join them.

She was touched by their thoughtfulness, and the time spent with them will always have a special place in her memory.

At 96, Helen McEwen has more zest for life than people half her age. A cheerful and fascinating lady, she can blow anyone's blues away.

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