

Miami Beach not as south as you think

Part one of a two-part series exploring some of York Region's smallest communities.

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For every thriving community maintaining a strong connection with its history, such as Aurora and Newmarket, many more have been lost over time, remembered only by a historical plaque, if they're lucky.

Many of our community names pay homage to historical figures, from Thornhill's Benjamin Thorne to Buttonville's Major John Button.

But others, such as Mongolia and Miami Beach, presumably have more eclectic origins.

My first stop was with Markham historian Lorne Smith, who worked with the York Chapter of the Pennsylvania German Folklore Society to produce two volumes of local hamlet history. Most, he explains, occupied four corners and received their names when they got post offices.

'They were just trying to find a name no one had.'

Lorne Smith
Markham historian

A typical postal outlet would be located in a general store, alongside a church and cemetery.

As many as 50 families in the surrounding rural area would constitute the community.

There is a reason why these communities are located where they are, Mr. Smith explains. Elgin Mills Road and Steeles Avenue were both plank roads, making them prime routes to Yonge Street.

Since horses need rest every two miles or so, hotels and other buildings sprang up along their lengths.

We all know how quickly York Region is growing, but it's worth taking a moment to consider the numbers.



STAFF PHOTO/SJOERD WITTEVEEN

Stouffville's Trevor Watson (left), who maintains the church cemetery, and historian Lorne Smith at Peaches United Church in northern Markham.

A 1,000-acre Markham plot that housed five families in 1850, now houses more like 5,000. That's progress. As for what's left; That's history.

I had high hopes given Mongolia's exotic name, but found little more than a couple of quiet, rural homes out at Elgin Mills and Reesor roads, just south of Stouffville.

Local farmers are renters and the land-

owner is the federal government, which gobbled up the prime farmland for the Pickering Airport in the 1970s. As wryly pointed out in the hamlet's history, this may all find itself replaced by a runway in the future.

During Mongolia's lifetime, there was a hotel and the expected shops (cobbler, blacksmith etc.), but that's all long gone.

NEXT TIME: It's just a short drive from Beverley Hills to Miami Beach and there's none of the white stuff in Snowball.

One of Mongolia's prime attractions, a 200-year-old elm tree in the middle of the road, died from dutch elm disease and was cut down in 1973.

Robert Curtis, the fellow who came up with the name, first picked nearly-as-absurd "California." Turns out, it was already being used.

Mongolia was on a list the post office people gave him as other options.

"They were just trying to find a name no one had," Mr. Smith offers.

Peaches sounds like a happy place and, indeed, it includes a lovely church dating from 1890 and a quaint cemetery (circa 1862), both located directly across from the Markham Fairgrounds.

Was there a peach orchard or at least a famous tree of some kind?

No, it's even simpler than that.

A man named Thomas "Daddy" Peach lead meetings of Old Time Primitive Methodists in an area schoolhouse. When a proper chapel opened in 1864, it was known as Peach's Chapel and over time, the apostrophe became an E.

As late as 1954, the community had high hopes, welcoming a new minister, celebrating a modernized service as well as a new coat of paint and tool shed for the church.

Its cemetery, maintained for 60 years by Trevor Watson, is the resting place for several members of the Peach family and a scan of the tombstones shows other familiar historic names, such as the Quantzes of Quantztown.

Suffice it to say there are no pyramids in Egypt. In fact, there doesn't seem to be much of anything at all, except country road stretching as far as the eye can see.

The name seems to be Biblical in origin.

According to my map, Egypt is out on Smith Road, east of Park Road and if you don't know where that is, don't worry: the Egyptians don't either.

It just goes to show that when you get to name your own community, you might as well go big.



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