

COMING UP

Diaries take exhibit viewers back in time

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History books provide details on wars, explorations, discoveries and every other type of large-scale, life-altering event that occurred in the world.

But it's the diaries of young girls, men and anybody else who ever dared to put pen to paper with their innermost thoughts that give us a glimpse into what daily life was really like, whether it be the 1600s, 1800s or today.

The newest exhibition at the Whitchurch-Stouffville Museum — A Lifetime: Day by Day, Five Women and their Diaries — looks at Ontario's female pioneers, through their own words.

The show, which opened Feb. 9, is on loan from the Archives of Ontario. The exhibition is also supplemented with artefacts from the museum's own collection.

"We want to get people thinking about how communication has changed," said Stephanie Foley, curator for the Whitchurch-Stouffville Museum.

Male farmers, who kept journals, typically, in succinct fashion, noted the weather and crops. Sometimes they made notations on family deaths and births.

"They're a little dry," Foley admitted.

Part of the museum's contribution includes journals from Noah Stouffer, the grandson of Abraham Stouffer, who founded Stouffville.

The journals are filled with daily, single-

line entries noting deaths of local people and family members, according to Foley.

The five women featured in the exhibition wrote in more detail about their families, friends, occupations, social interactions and by extension, their communities.

Phoebe Holden Gregg's journal starts in 1849 when she married at age 18 and ends in 1863 when she is 62.

Gregg's daughter, Bessie Gregg Stewart, also started a diary of her own on her wedding day.

FACEBOOK: THE NEW JOURNAL?

Frances Tweedie Milne wrote in her journal from age 18 to 34.

Among her entries was the admission she suffered from depression following the birth of her third child.

"I am alone and baby cried some. I am feeling very sad sometimes," Milne wrote in 1872 at age 21.

The women also wrote about their children, in much the same way we do today: "Baby can push a chair round the room." "Charles took one step today in the pantry." "Baby trying to walk more and doesn't seem afraid of falling."

Foley not only wants the exhibition to give people a glimpse of the past, but have us take a look at the ways we communicate today.

"Everybody's attention span is so short, do we communicate well with anyone, have we lost the ability to communicate

with each other anymore because we're so attached to our tablets and phones?" she said.

While some people may still actually write in a diary/journal, we typically don't keep them as private as they once were. Blogs and Facebook have replaced hiding them in the back of the drawer, wrapped in a shirt, so no one would find it.

"We think that the main difference has been a societal shift from the diary era to now. At that point, the diary was used to record private thoughts that were not intended to be shared with anyone. Society and families in general were more private. There were lots of things that happened in your lives that you just did not share — maybe even within your family and certainly not outside your family," according to Foley.

"Society has become more accepting over the years and so sharing everything on Facebook now reflects a more open society, anything goes. ... We did note that it's not necessarily a more honest communication now, as people put a happy spin on a lot of their posts and share pictures of themselves in happy, social moments. The diaries were likely recording a more honest, however, repetitive and mundane storyline," she added.

The exhibition runs until April 30.

For more information, go to www.townofws.ca/en/explore/museum.asp?_mid_=11144



WHITCHURCH-STOUFFVILLE MUSEUM

The diaries of young girls and men alike are included in an exhibition at the Whitchurch-Stouffville Museum in Vondorf through April 30.

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