

Turning Back the Clock

Historic photo courtesy of Whitchurch-Stouffville Museum



A WHITCHURCH VETERAN - Mel Pipher, born in Lemonville, served in the First World War as a York Ranger. You'll find his name on one of the white crosses in the Stouffville Cemetery.

Letters

Pine Orchard Church says thanks

Dear Editor,

Just a quick note to say a thank you for taking the time to drop off the extra copies of your paper to us. I appreciate it very much, and my children were very pleased to be able to have a copy of their grandmother's story about the Church of Christ at Pine Orchard (WSTM October

2004).

The anniversary day was a complete success and we had about 100 guests attend, some of them former pupils in Sunday School and Church.

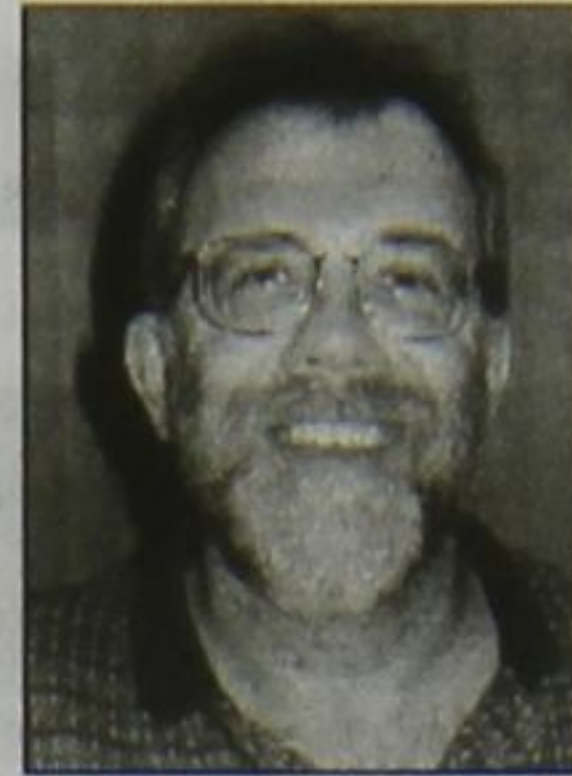
It was a fantastic day from start to finish, and the food made by all the ladies who regularly attend Pine Orchard was just awesome. In fact, we had three very

large trays of first course and desserts that were taken to Yellow Brick House in Aurora for their supper that same evening.

All in all, it was a wonderful day!

Thanks again for being so interested in our little congregation.

Doris E. Stewart
Pine Orchard Church



Con-fessions

When you wish upon a shoe

by Conrad Boyce

"Shoe tree". You hear those words, and in your brain you form an image of that strange wood-and-metal contraption we insert into leather footwear to ensure it keeps its shape in a crowded closet. A contraption that, without too much modification, looks like it could serve as a device for excruciating torture.

The "shoe tree" is truly an ingenious tool; if I'd invented it, my descendants would probably be living luxuriously off the royalties. Imelda Marcos on her own undoubtedly uses hundreds of them. But take your mind away from Imelda's closet for a moment, and enter the wonderful world of rural Ontario, which I first did about nine years ago. At least in our part of the province (and I'd be curious to know if other parts of Ontario have the same custom), a "shoe tree" is exactly what it says it is: a tree that grows shoes, or at least wears shoes. In case you haven't seen one, allow me to explain.

On at least three byways I'm aware of within a half hour's drive of here, a traveller will encounter a living tree whose trunk and lower branches are festooned with shoes, dozens of shoes, every type of shoe from Oxford to pump to sneaker, with even the odd sandal or rubber boot thrown in. Although some of the shoes are tied together with laces and thrown over a branch, most are attached directly to the trunk with a nail or tack, and there are so many that the actual bark of the tree is quite invisible. The effect from a distance is that of a multi-coloured fungi slowly taking over the tree.

Curiously, I have never seen anyone actually affixing their old footwear to one of these trees, so I've never been able to question them on their motive for doing so.

But my understanding is that in this particular neck of the woods, the "shoe tree" is a kind of wishing well. Instead of casting coins into a fountain or pool, locals whisper a fervent hope or desire, and nail an old shoe to a tree. An odd custom, surely, and a ritual probably best performed in the wee small hours when potential spectators are few, wouldn't you think?

So how did this custom originate? Why shoes?

I posed these questions to Allan MacGillivray, curator of the Uxbridge-Scott Museum not far from a couple of the trees, and he has, no idea, although he recalls a similar tree at Gamebridge, on the Trent-Severn Canal east of Lake Simcoe, receiving a lot of publicity a few years back. Was the Gamebridge tree the original "shoe tree", or just one high-profile example of a long-established rural tradition?

If any institution might have record of such a tradition, you'd think Toronto's Bata Shoe Museum would be it. But curator Julia Pine was stumped (if you'll pardon the pun). "Maybe it has something to do with the old European tradition of putting shoes in the walls of new houses as a fertility boost, or putting out shoes instead of stockings at Christmas (as the Dutch do), or loggers nailing the dead man's boots to a tree when one of their own dies in a logging accident," mused Julia. "But I suspect it's really not an old custom at all, just a fairly recent fad. Someone nailed his sister's high heels to a tree as a joke, and it caught on."

So is a "shoe tree" a memorial? A mass fertility rite? Environmental art? Here's my theory. This part of Ontario was settled by Quaker and Mennonite immigrants from the north-eastern States in the very early nineteenth century. If I had my druthers, I'd prefer to think that the "shoe tree" is an ancient Quaker tradition carried on by southern Ontarians for almost two centuries. Next time I'm in rural Pennsylvania or Vermont, I'll drive slowly and keep an eye out.

In the fourth paragraph above, I confess I wasn't being totally honest with you. I have seen *one* person attaching an old shoe to one of these trees.

That romantic old fool was me, and my wish came true, after a few twists and turns. So next time you're tempted to wish upon a star, take an old slipper instead and tack it to the nearest maple, preferably in the middle of the night. Then, next morning, stand back and listen to what the neighbours say.

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