

YESTERDAY

News from the Tavistock and District Historical Society

VOLUME 21

WINTER 2012

*It was the night before Christmas
and all through the house ...*



Christmas Memories...

NEW WEB SITE LAUNCH

www.tavistockhistory.ca • e-mail: info@tavistockhistory.ca • See article on page 3

**Tavistock & District
Historical Society**

Executive:

Chair - Brian Bennett
Secretary – Mary Nicklas
Treasurer – Bob Rudy

Directors:

Paul Bartlett
Sherrill Calder
Bill Gladding
Harry Lawry
Barb Matthies
Ed Pellow
Mary Stewart

Tim Mosher

**Tavistock
& District
Historical
Society**

37 Maria Street,
Box 280,
Tavistock, Ontario,
Canada NOB 2R0

**MUSEUM
HOURS:**

*Saturdays
10am-12 noon*

*Closed months of
January & February*

*Other times
by appointment:
call 519-655-9915*

**SUPPORT THE
WORK OF THE
MUSEUM/ARCHIVES**
Annual membership
\$10.00 per annum

Standing room only

The Christmas Concert

Reading and writing and arithmetic were unquestionably the mainstays of school life in years gone by. Ask any student who attended a one-room schoolhouse their favourite memory and almost everyone will say “the Christmas Concert”.

Practice for the annual Christmas Concert began in November of each year. By early December the date and time was announced in the Gazette. A typical announcement from 1953 read ... “Christmas Concert, SS # 8, Tuesday, December 22, 8:30 p.m. Everyone welcome.”

Costume making was in full production by early December with many hours spent at the cutting board and on the sewing machine. Close to the big day some of the men from the Section went to see Bob Rudy to borrow wood to build the stage. Yes - borrow. The wood was returned after the concert - no charge. Mothers sent white sheets to drape over wires and become the stage curtains. Excitement built by the day and everyone crossed their fingers for good weather. One of the last tasks was decorating the school room with crepe paper streamers and, of course, a Christmas tree cut from a nearby bush.

On that very special concert night the dads who were farmers (which was pretty much every dad) worked faster to finish the chores early so they could put on their Sunday suit and be off for the big event. Mothers wore their Sunday best, as well, as did grandparents and aunts and uncles and everyone who attended (which was pretty much everyone in the community). It was standing room only.

A typical Christmas concert in the one-room school house started with a welcoming chorus by the school (all 8 grades), a welcoming recitation and the Chairman’s remarks. It wasn’t uncommon to feature 7 or 8 musical solos ... accordian or piano or vocal; 3 or

4 short plays with titles ranging from “What Makes Christmas Merry” to “Bachelor’s Lonely Christmas”; several rounds of carols by the school chorus; a few exercises or drills (the Japanese doll drill was a favourite). Then, when everyone was over their stage

fright and just about bursting with excitement ... Santa arrived! Many times Santa bounded across the tops of the desks calling out “ho ho ho” to boys and girls of all ages as he made his way to the stage.

Honestly - does it get any better? Well, perhaps when Santa gave out a candy bag to each school child, especially if the bag included a popcorn ball. All

too soon it was time to go home. The big event was over for another year but the memories lived on forever.



Did you know?

The Tavistock Men’s Club began Santa visits in 1938, handing out candy bags to the children at the Library and the Opera Hall. The events also featured “talking pictures”.

100 YEARS OF RECORDED SOUND

The Society presented 100 years of the recorded voice for its speaker series on September 19, 2012 at Grace United Church, Tavistock.

Blain McCutchen has a collection of nearly 100 phonographs and paraphernalia related to early sound recordings. With the help of a slide presentation, he stepped through the stages of improvements in sound recording and played snippets from them on his antique machines.

It was thought that Thomas Edison made the first voice recording in 1877, but new information has recently come to light that some earlier recordings were created by French physicist Leon Scott de Martinville in 1860. He made a machine that recorded sound waves on tin foil in an effort to measure the amplitude of sound waves. It was Mr. Edison, however, who was able to record and play back the sound with his phonograph machine.

This great invention has driven many of our leading industries. In 2012, NASA used a human voice to be their first transmission from the surface of Mars.

A very special Santa

It takes a very special person to put on the red suit and white beard, sling the sack over his back and act out one of the most important parts at Christmas events ... Santa Claus.

For Milt Sippel, there was little acting required. Milt was a natural. He had the physical build and the outgoing personality. Best of all, he knew how to keep his Santa identity a secret. Well, almost.

Milt was Santa for years and years at many schools throughout the area. He had his own red suit (size very large), a cap complete with pom pom, white beard and even a mask to hide his identity. Milt forgot one thing. Early in his Santa career he didn't wear gloves. One year, when his son

Farrell was about 9 or 10 years old, Farrell recognized his dad's hands giving out the Santa candy bags. The jig was almost up.

Farrell was sworn to secrecy and forever after Santa wore black gloves as well he should as it's cold in the North Pole.

Another very special Santa was George Wilhelm. George understood the importance of believing that Santa lives at the North Pole and not on the Maplewood Sideroad. It was only this year that his own children, now all grown with children and grandchildren of their



own, found out why their dad wasn't home on certain nights in late December.

Notes on Christmas

In 2006 the Tavistock and District Historical Society produced an oral history DVD called "School Days". It features three teachers from the days of the one-room schoolhouse Mary Alice Roth who began her career as Miss Howard; Kaye Bickle who began her career as Miss Wittig; and Ruth Rosenberg who began her career as Miss Kinzie.

A highlight from that DVD is the three ladies recollections of the Christmas Concert, some of which is included in this newsletter.



The pictures for the previous stories are courtesy of Kaye Bickle, Claudette Wettlaufer and our Historical Society files. All pictures are from the mid 1950s.

www.tavistockhistory.ca

The Tavistock and District Historical Society is preparing for the launch of our new website. Along with our newsletter archive and death notice directory with over 6,400 entries, the site will feature searchable directories of over 500 local war veterans, as well as nearly 3,000 photographs from The Lemp Studio Collection, plus lots more.

One Christmas Eve

A Christmas truce during World War I

One word. If you were asked to describe this Christmas season in just one word, what would that word be? Joyful? Fun? Hectic? Sad? Christmas takes on a different personality for each of us and it changes from Christmas to Christmas, from year to year.

One thing is constant. Throughout the centuries, in this season of peace on earth - good will towards men, there is always some country, some people at war. The history books are full of the horror stories of war. Occasionally, out of the horror, comes a brief and shining moment of hope. One word - hope.

The story of Captain Ed Kaufmann won't be found in a history book. Rather, it's been passed from person to person. Somehow that oral history retelling makes it more personal, more real and more enduring.

Ed Kaufmann was born in Cassel in 1885. Like all farm boys at the time Ed learned to shoot at an early age. He quickly proved to be exceptionally proficient with a gun, taking out small targets at long distances. Sometimes, just for fun, he'd throw the gun over his shoulder and, using a mirror, shoot squirrels and groundhogs who thought they were safe behind his back.

When war broke out in 1914 many boys signed up for all the wrong reasons. They thought the war would be over in a month and signing up would be a cheap way to see the sights of Europe. Ed Kaufmann was 29 years old in 1914 ... old enough to know that going to war was serious business.

Ed quickly progressed to the rank of Captain and soon saw first hand what trench warfare was all about. His marksmanship skills stood him in good stead. His way with people earned him the respect of his men. His "secret weapon" proved to be very valuable. Like most everyone growing up in Cassel Ed spoke and understood the German language. When the guns were silenced you could often hear voices from the trenches occupied by the enemy. Captain Ed understood exactly what they were saying.

Unlike modern warfare, the first world war had accepted rules of engagement that were largely honoured by both sides. One such "rule" was that there was no fighting on Christmas Eve and Christmas

Day. The guns on both sides were silenced.

One Christmas Eve Ed and his men were hunkered down in their trench when they heard the strains of a very familiar song. German soldiers in a nearby trench were observing Christmas as they knew best ... by singing that age-old carol, Silent Night. Of course, in their version it was Stille Nacht. Captain Ed knew all the words in German and he started to sing stille nacht, heilige nacht. Soon heads started appearing above the trenches on both sides. Before the night was over both sides were sharing a campfire and singing the carols they had learned as children.

That Christmas Eve the soldiers on both sides realized that even though their nations were at war, as people they had much in common. They had families. They had fears. They wanted to have a future ... a good long future in a world of peace. As the story goes, Captain Ed and his German counterpart made a pact that night. When each told their men about the plan, the soldiers on both sides agreed. Everyone was sworn to secrecy. To break the secret meant everyone would be charged with treason and sentenced to death. The plan was that when the battle resumed after the Christmas truce both sides would fight as they did beforethis time with a change. Every shot fired would be aimed one foot above the head of the enemy soldier. As far as their superiors were concerned, there would be lots of gunfire. As far as the soldiers were concerned, for as long as they were fighting the men they had shared a Christmas campfire with, there would be no casualties. Each knew the value of life and they shared the common

hope of peace.

Captain Ed Kaufmann returned from the battlefield to live out his life in Cassel. He married a lady named Helen Moor who died at an early age from complications of childbirth. Ed died in 1959 and both are buried in the 17th line cemetery.

Long after the war was over Ed told his story to a very few people. They, in turn, have kept it alive. As with most oral histories there is fact and there is some embellishment as it passes from person to person. Captain Ed Kaufmann's story is one of hope amidst the horrors of war. We believe we want to believe that every part of this story is true.



A great Christmas gift!

Stars of the Town Double DVD \$25

Copies of the Tavistock Movie recorded by Rev. Roy Masseur in 1947-48 are available for order at the Museum and Archives.

The 2-disc DVD features the original version of the movie plus a special edition with the names of people added throughout the video to enhance the recording for historic purposes.

