

Preserving Dingle Schoolhouse a must says local arts community

Written By KIRA WRONSKA DORWARD

This is the second part of a feature piece highlighting a local activist group's efforts to preserve the century-old Dingle Schoolhouse.

In a letter to Mike Fenning, Senior Manager, Conservation Lands and Property Services at the TRCA, the committee extols the importance of preserving the Dingle Schoolhouse.

‘As you know,’ the letter begins, ‘in 1988 Rosemary Kilbourn sold her property, which she had improved on in many ways, to the Toronto Regional Conservation Authority, at the Glen Haffy Site, on the condition that she be allowed to live there until she moved. This arrangement was made at a time when sensitivity to local history and culture was not as developed as it is at present. As Canadians we have a history of neglecting our artists and our cultural heritage, particularly those artists who are also women. It is quite possible that the TRCA is not fully aware of the importance of Rosemary's life-work and this property to the history of art in Ontario and Canada.’

Now that the house and property will be reverting to the TRCA on Nov. 1, as per the original agreement Kilbourn made in 1988, the burning question that remains unanswered is what will become of the Dingle, which at the very least is of great historical and cultural significance, and should ideally be designated as a Heritage Property. Worries about neglect of the structure, or what that Schoolhouse might be used for by the Conservation Authority, are paramount in this discussion.

The worry is in this political climate, with a conservative government cutting funding to essential heritage and conservation programs, the Conservation Authority is doing its best just to survive. Premier Doug Ford and his party are looking to target organizations like the TRCA, divest themselves of responsibility, and give the responsibilities back to municipalities rather than a central authority.

With municipal governments and provincial organizations largely frozen until the outcome of October's election, the pressure is mounting, and the silence is ringing in everyone's ears.

‘It's a sticky situation,’ comments Amanda Jernigan, a local poet with long-time ties to the Dingle. ‘There's been no communication about what's happening next. It feels like the opposite of conservation to me.’

‘We're waiting on tenterhooks,’ Philippa Kilbourn, Rosemary's niece adds.

Absolutely Untouched

‘It's absolutely untouched,’ comments local activist Debbe Crandall. ‘You don't really see that anymore. It's phenomenal.’

The Dingle Schoolhouse and property is in so many ways a totally unique and iconic piece of Canadian cultural and natural history.

‘This particular area,’ says Rosemary Kilbourn, ‘is totally unique. It just seems like such a marvellously unique place.’ She recounts stories of the life of the schoolhouse predating her residence, where pupils would carry rifles to school so they might hunt their family's dinner on the way home, and where one child would ride her pony to school, who, while bored during her mistress' lesson, would stick her head through the schoolhouse window periodically.

Kilbourn, her family, and friends recount several anecdotes about life at the Dingle, from the annual Thanksgiving dinners to walks in the surroundings, where Kilbourn often used a cowbell to call people home who had gotten lost.

‘We would spend days and days running around and picking up wild apples,’ comments Kilbourn's nephew, Tim. The apple cores

and seeds from brought by students in the previous century had by this time grown into adult trees, and so the current occupants of the Dingle benefitted from a previous layer of the property's history in the sweetest way.

Tim and Philippa's older brother, Nicholas, was a composer of New Music, a genre which was conceptual, experimental, and multimedia (hence the frogs). Nicholas would bring his musician buddies and his instruments, playing through the nights alongside the chorus of spring frogs in what was called, 'the Frog Bog.' Performances went on until dawn, and were recorded with frogs et al.

'We went along the streams with Rosemary leading the way, and explored the slopes of the Humber River,' niece Philippa recounts. 'We did this wonderful trek. It was magical.'

The anecdotes of life at the Dingle, both when it was a school and after it became Kilbourn's residence, are idyllic and charming, like stories out of a Farley Mowat novel. 'People have this image of him as a big curmudgeon,' recounts Kilbourn of her author neighbour on the 30th Sideroad, 'but he was a loving, sweet person.'

Leaving A Lasting Legacy

More than just the natural, isolated beauty of the property, there are many layers of cultural history that go beyond the many great artists who worked there, who are growing in national profile. It was a loyalist property that lent itself to a country schoolhouse, and that schoolhouse then lent itself as the setting and inspiration to some of the greatest works of Canadian art ever made.

For Canadian art historians who, when it comes to naturalists, tend to focus on the Group of Seven, Kilbourn and her creative associates prove that there is much more to Canadian art and art scholarship than the same group of seven men.

'We're late to the game to unearth this stuff,' chimes in Zoe Lepiano, a local curator. 'Basically, what we want to do is make the TRCA aware that there's so much more potential there. Ideally, it would be a space where artists could live in residence and all sorts of events could happen there. What we want to do is get the TRCA to the table, and so now there's a conversation to make this happen,' says Lepiano.

There are precedents for this idea, such as the Dorothy McCarthy Arts-in-Residence Centre, located at the artist's former home, Fool's Paradise, in the Scarborough Bluffs. Managed by the Ontario Heritage Trust and partnered with RBC bank, the program, following McCarthy's wishes, gives other artists the opportunity to work in a creative space in an atmosphere that fostered so much of her own artistic expression. The Centre is a 'unique, living and working incubator for visual artists, musicians and writers of all disciplines, offering privacy and opportunity for artists to concentrate on their work. As part of the residency, artists are required to provide a mentorship opportunity to support the development of an emerging artist or artists', according to the Ontario Heritage Trust website. McCarthy was a friend and worked alongside Kilbourn, and donated the trails around her Fool's Paradise property to the TRCA as well.

The Committee is currently in the process of gathering local and institutional support from various government art grants, private donations, and partnerships with the University of Toronto in order to realize a similar vision to the McCarthy program. In their appeal to the TRCA, the also included letters of support from the local and artistic community.

'We want to cast light upon an important part of this heritage,' Jernigan summarizes, 'which is the artistic flowering that happened here. The strata of community life because of Rosemary being so generous in inviting people to her home. It made me feel I could use the artistic traditions I grew up with [in] Southern Ontario? Some of the great works of art were made in this house, some of the greatest poetry. For me, this is a kind of pilgrimage site and will continue to be more so as [these artists] stars are rising. In this place of natural beauty, we find hope for our generation, growing up with an environment that's under stress.'