

The '50s was a good time to grow up in a small town

By Bill Rea

There are some who knock small-town life, especially in years past.

But those times contained a lot of nostalgic memories which the Caledon East Historical Society learned about recently.

Local author Ken Weber reflected on his own experiences living in a small town in the early 1950s.

He said that was a good time to be growing up, with the Toronto Maple Leafs at least being competitive for the Stanley Cup and before people really understood the meaning of the word 'terrorism.'

Those people were regarded as country types, and often teased by urban dwellers. Weber said he had a cousin who lived in Detroit, and regarded him as backward.

'I got him to slow down, though, when I got him to pee on an electric fence,' he said.

Those were the days when there would only be one phone in the house (Weber said his grandchildren look at him as if he's from another planet when he tells them that). 'One' was an important number in his town in those days. In that town, like many others, there was only one clothing store, one hairdresser, one plumber, one carpenter, etc. One the advantages he mentioned was when one hired a carpenter, they didn't run the risk of dying of old age waiting for the building permit.

There was also one tailor, who Weber said believed in 'one size fits all, especially for men's pants.'

He said it was the kind of place where each house had a ball of string next to a stack of paper grocery bags, and people didn't have to be told to reuse.

Weber said his father had a hardware store; the type of establishment where a customer could buy one battery, or a handful of nails.

Those were also the days when his father pushed his lawnmower, and drinking water came from a well.

Those were also the days when radios had tubes. 'You could improve reception by banging it with your fist,' he recalled.

And mothers wore hats and gloves when they went shopping.

Another advantage he mentioned was everybody knew things about their community. 'It was life without Google,' he observed.

Weber recalled the church people belonged to was important to them, but it was not something that was regularly discussed, and there wasn't a lot of friction either. He said Catholics in town watched the Orange Parade, adding it was a Catholic who owned the white horse that led the parade. It was a 'product of small-town wisdom and small-town experience' to keep head-butting issues off the table.

He recalled there were two good friends in town who both fought at Vimy Ridge; one for the Germans and the other for Canada.

'If the generals on both sides had grown up in the same small town, there would never have been a war,' they used to say.

When it came to social problems in town, Weber said they had more than their share of people who drank too much. Referring to one priest, he said, 'his idea of drink responsibly was don't spill it.'

He added that during the winter of 1950, a group of men from town found themselves stuck in Orangeville for a couple of days.

Orangeville was 'dry' at the time. He said they called that 'a preview of hell.'

Weber also recalled a lack of complaining in those days, with a more relaxed atmosphere and more of a general acceptance.

'You didn't have to keep up with the Joneses because we were all Joneses,' he said.

Weber pointed out there are a lot more choices facing people today than was the case in the '50s. He pointed to the number of TV channels available now, to the one people in his town watched.

'Everybody watched it faithfully,' he recalled.

He also said TV 'killed the '50s.

'The card parties stopped,' Weber said. 'People stopped visiting each other.'



Local author Ken Weber recently addressed the Caledon East Historical Society.