

The Humber marking 20 years as a Canadian Heritage River

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If you go south on the Mono-Adjala Townline from the Village of Hockley, you will come to a bridge and the river flowing under it is the Humber, which is being celebrated this year for its 20th anniversary of being designated a Canadian Heritage River.

This designation, important as it is, was not easily achieved.

Forty years ago, the federal government had brought in the idea of designating certain rural rivers as Canadian Heritage rivers as a way of preserving them and acknowledging their importance to the history of Canada. The fundamental present day and future purpose of the designation is to assure the river, its wetlands, flora and wildlife are protected as areas of natural conservation.

When the newly minted Humber Heritage Committee (HHC) went to present the idea of making the Humber a Canadian Heritage River, they were turned down. Only rural rivers were suitable candidates for the designation. They were adamant that only rivers in the north were logically the ones to be designated. They were, apparently, the ones with the history.

However, the HHC pressed on, for years, showing the value of the Humber to industry and commerce over the decades, contributing to the economy and development of the entire area.

Every village along the river had its mill, which, even in those days, polluted the river to the extent that fish no longer inhabited it and so that source of food was lost to the population. In every way the river served the country, whether the country served it or not.

The members of the HHC brought pressure to bear on the Ministry of Natural Resources, which was and is a provincial body.

In short, there were so very many people, showing unrelenting determination that they became involved with committees, concerned with the conservation of heritage buildings, landscapes and water, for the Albion Bolton area and for the greater region through which the Humber flows.

Even what was once known as the Toronto River, the water that ran down through the country to Lake Ontario, along what was called the Toronto Carrying Place, a stretch of trail and river the indigenous people used, that part of the river became the southern end of the Humber River.

The ancient trail, called the Toronto Stretch was soon understood by trappers from France for its value in carrying fur, produce, copper and they adapted it to their needs. Subsequently, over the hundreds of years of use, a plan was made to make a road of it by Lieutenant Governor Simcoe, but he decided to build another road, instead, Yonge Street.

In the very long run, it was the tenacity that wore on the Toronto Region Conservation Authority (TRCA), who were not enthusiastic about making urban rivers heritage rivers.

Nevertheless, they created the Humber Watershed task force and appointed Gary Wilkins as the Humber specialist and he worked towards getting it designated.

Speaking at the gathering of those who had worked so hard for so long, at Hampton House in Toronto, on the southern end of the Humber, Gary Wilkins said simply, "It came together because of the efforts of all the community of the Humber Watershed." Many of those attending were older people but they were still alive. The accomplishment and their now steady parts in the success of the effort.

A lady from the TRCA stood up and declared, "This is a fine example of volunteers collected to make things happen. We were at

our very best to make people aware of the value of the Humber.?

All this organizing finally brought the issue to a head so that, in 1999, the designation for the Humber, and then, over a much shorter, time the Grand, the Trent and the Severn Rivers were given Canadian Heritage River designations.

In 1954, Hurricane Hazel hit the region of Dufferin and Peel, decimating the land, coming as it did after days of torrential rains. Homes were lost to floods and lessons were learned but never well enough and memory is often weal when industry or development is pushing.

In the 1960's, plans were being made to build a dam on the Humber north of Bolton. At the final get-together for the 20th, at the Bolton library, the history of the dam and its not being built were discussed. At the end of all the surveys and discussion, by early 1970s the dam which was gong to go down 100 feet, was abandoned at last, because, there was quicksand at where it would have been set.

Since the designation of the Humber the others have also designated and the Humber is free to support the marshes, wild and flora that it does.

However, there is always pressure form developers and, regardless of increase in population and all the other reasons, that pressure must be resisted.