

UofT professor shares history of Jokers Hill

Written By KIM SILLCOX

The King Township Historical Society's (KTHS) second speaker of the year was Professor Art Weis of the University of Toronto, who shared the history of Jokers Hill to a sold-out audience at Hogan's Inn in November.

Among the attendees was Moffat Dunlap, who contributed invaluable history and photos to Art for his presentation, as well as past members of the Toronto and North York Hunt Club and Pony Clubs.

Known today as the University of Toronto's Koffler Scientific Reserve, Jokers Hill has a rich history stretching back nearly 150 years.

Situated between Bathurst and Keele Streets north of the 19th Sideroad, this property was acquired in the early 1950s by the late General Churchill Mann and his wife Billie (nee McLaughlin), the daughter of Col. Sam McLaughlin, founder of General Motors, Canada. As members of the Toronto and North York Hunt Club, the Manns had a passion for horses and ultimately created a premier equestrian facility at Jokers Hill where Canadian Olympic hopefuls trained on a cross-country course that General Mann personally helped build, including a 12-mile cross-country course and 50 miles of groomed trails.

Billie Mann named the 889-acre property Jokers Hill after her hunter horse Joker, who Billie said would run up to the highest point of the property (1,100 feet above sea level) where they eventually built their home, and overlook the surrounding countryside.

The Manns were extremely generous with Jokers Hill and regularly hosted the Toronto and North York Hunt Club, as well as aspiring members of the Canadian Equestrian team, for hunts, training and steeplechases.

According to Brian Herbinson, who won bronze in the three-day event alongside teammates Jim Elder and John Rumble at the 1956 Olympics, the Canadian team would not have had the success it did were it not for the Manns' generosity.

In the early 1960s, the Manns parcelled off their property east of Dufferin and eventually sold the remaining property between Keele and Dufferin to Brian and Nancy Benitz of Toronto in 1964. The Benitz family owned the property for about 10 years before selling it to Murray and Marvelle Koffler, the founders of Shoppers Drug Mart.

The Kofflers were members of the Toronto and North York Hunt Club and purchased it as a weekend retreat.

Among the many refurbishments the Kofflers made to the main house and property, was a stunning glass gazebo adjacent to the larger of the two ponds on the property designed by well-known architect, Ray Moriyama.

Over the years, guests to Jokers Hill included Prince Philip and Princess Margaret, Pierre and Margaret Trudeau, as well as other eminent leaders from the Canadian business and arts world.

In 1995, Murray and Marvelle spontaneously decided to gift Jokers Hill to the University of Toronto while hosting a party with U of T's President Robert Prichard. It was the largest-ever land gift to a Canadian university and made U of T one of the largest landowners on the Oak Ridges Moraine and steward of a site of regional, provincial and national significance.

According to Dr. Weis, an Ecology and Evolutionary Biology Professor and former Director of U of T's Koffler Scientific Reserve, this land is special not only for its rich history but its breadth of biological diversity.

"From my point of view it's a jewel because while it's only 880 acres, Jokers Hill contains patches of just about every habitat type in southern Ontario," explained Dr. Weis. "It is a rather biologically diverse area including everything from recently cultivated fields

going back to nature, to old growth forest that has never been cut since the last glacier. This has got to be the largest old growth forest left in southern Ontario.?

At any given time there could be up to 35 research and scientific studies at the facility, including research in climate change, ecology, evolution, migration patterns, genetics, environmental science and cognate areas of study.

The site is being considered for a much-needed renovation over the next 10 years, with improved infrastructure and housing for the influx of researchers. A hidden and slightly forgotten gem in King, this facility is quickly becoming one of the leading environmental research centres in North America.