

BACKWOODS PLAYERS

NEWSLETTER*

NOVEMBER 2001 Edition



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Pickering, Ontario

A Spirit Walk 2001

“Echoes from the Past”

This year’s A Spirit Walk, directed by Larry O’Leary, was undeniably the best ever. Participants and audience members alike were unanimous in their praise of its professionalism, both in the acting and production, as well as changes to the script that enhanced the continuity of the story line. But it was events in contemporary newspapers and television that gave the story an immediacy none of us could have predicted, as descendants of Elder George Barclay did battle with today’s government for the right to remain in Elder Barclay’s house, known to all as Tullis Cottage.

Events of the distant past seemed to echo through the ages and made the annual reunion of the rebels even more poignant. As Willsons, Goulds, Matthews and Barclays met in the Oddfellows Hall, their talk seemed to focus around the fate of that simple wooden cottage, built in the shadow of the Rebellion by one of Pickering’s greatest citizens.

Over 600 guests came to see A Spirit Walk this year, ranging from grade 7-8 school children at the dress rehearsal delighted to see their school principal in the starring role of Peter Matthews; to the annual visit of Peter Matthews’ descendants from Michigan, home to many of the Rebellion’s exiles; and 18 members of the Gould family, seeing A Spirit Walk for the first time.

Descendant Rick Matthews brought with him a cherished piece of Pickering history, the remains of a gravestone marking the final resting place of one of Peter’s brothers. The Gould family provided copies of their family history to add to the other documents that form



Joe Bezubiak as
Chief Justice
John Beverly Robinson
(photo Mary Cook)

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From a Seed...

*By Katrina Pyke, Volunteer Co-ordinator,
Pickering Museum Village*

It began as a niggling idea, in the back of the mind, often put aside, but periodically forcing its way to acknowledgement. It would show itself as a vision of what might be, and it came at unexpected times. Moments when the museum village was empty but for a few. A rainy day. A hot, humid day. And it sprang up on days when the museum was crowded with visitors. And amazingly, it sprang to full fruition from someone else’s mind: appearing in the form of robust Mrs. Collins who was churning her butter with the help of a small cluster of school children on a hot August morning, hospitable and charitable Mrs. Miller who welcomed children on a wintry morning while preparing her

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* WHAT’S IN A NAME?

Plenty! Which is why it took a lot of clever people a long time to come up with the name for our theatre company. Those brains are exhausted, so we’re looking to you for help. Name our newsletter for us, please, and you will win a beautiful Backwoods Players T-shirt! Suggestions for names, as well as ideas for articles, should be sent to Mary Delaney, who wants to deliver bouquets of roses to Greg Oakes for his invaluable assistance in creating this, our first-ever Backwoods Players Newsletter!



Board of Directors

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Mark Your Calendar!**Saturday, November 24th****Workshop for Christmas in the Village**

Techniques of historically correct first-person interpretation of Victorian Christmas (Miller-Cole); a German Christmas (Collins); the General Store; and Scottish Hogmanay in the Log House.

Sunday, December 2 & 9**Christmas in the Village**

Whether you're in costume or not, bring your family to PMV's most charming event and savour the spirit of Christmas past. Watch Backwoods' production of Dust of the Road, a one-act play set in the firelit warmth of our 1830's log schoolhouse. Call the museum for show times.

Tuesday, February 5**Workshop: The Language of the Day, or 'Say What?!'**

Education instructors from the Museum will work with Backwoods actors to develop their language skills, enhance first person interpretation and prevent those eargrating anachronisms, from 'OK' to 'Hi', that can mar an otherwise 19th century mood.

Tuesday, March 5**Workshop: Preparing an Audition Piece**

Just in time for A Spirit Walk and Whodunit? auditions, Backwoods' artistic Director Bill Sharp will walk you gently through the daunting task of preparing an audition piece. Do I wear a costume? Bring props? Speak with an accent? Bring a little something for the director? Bill has the answers!

Tuesday, April 30**Backwoods Players First Annual General Meeting**

All welcome. Location and time to be announced.

Friday, April 5th and 12th starting at 7 p.m.**Auditions for A Spirit Walk**

Parts available for males and females of all ages, all parts to be cast by audition. Call the museum to book audition time. More dates and times to be announced. Further details in our spring newsletter.

Tuesday, June 5th**Auditions for Whodunit?**

Further details on audition times and details of the play will be available in our spring newsletter.

Saturday, July 6**Whodunit?**

An interactive murder-mystery and dinner set in the Pickering Museum Village.

**President's
Message**

Welcome to the first edition of the Backwoods Players Newsletter. From our humble beginnings in February of this year, we have become, in very short order, a vibrant new addition to the theatrical stage of Durham Region. Our accomplishments are many as we have established an executive and board of directors, we have established a Constitution, we are registered members of Act-Co and Theatre Ontario and our core group of actors/supporters has expanded nearly ten fold in only eight months.

Backwoods Players is a volunteer theatrical troupe attached to the Pickering Museum Village. Be sure that this is not meant to restrict us to work within the timeline established by the museum. The Constitution of Backwoods Players states:

"The purpose of the organization is to provide members with an opportunity to learn and practise dramatic skills, to encourage script writing and research, and to develop dramatic activities in support of the PMV and its events."

Support for the Pickering Museum Village is welcomed through a wide variety of activities. Whether your interest lies in individual scripted productions, first person interpretation at museum events, improving your talents through drama workshops or lending a hand with new scriptwriting or prop building – Backwoods Players has a place for you.



Join us as we clear a path for living history and innovative theatre in Durham Region.

Catherine Hodge,

President
Backwoods Players

An Interview with the Man behind St. George

On a sultry September afternoon six characters in search of an audience donned layer upon layer of costumes, wizards' hat, robes, wimple and papier mache masks, picked up their travelling trunk and set about entertaining the good people of Greenwood with a medieval mummery. Backwoods approached the genius behind the masks, Bill Sharp, for the story behind the story.....

Backwoods: Why, Bill?

Bill: In June, 1483, er, 1983 I should say, some friends in Port Hope were having a party to celebrate the 500th anniversary of the coronation of Richard III. There are many who truly believe he was a great king. For those who doubt, read, "The Daughter of Time" by Josephine Tey....Pardon me, I digress. And I believe my hump is showing.... Where was I?

Backwoods: You were going to a house party.

Bill: Ah yes, a house party! Our friends lived at 'Hillcrest', now a spa but then a private residence. But what a residence – 10 bedrooms, 3 oil furnaces, 12 foot ceilings, former summer home of the Black/Schwartz family of Pittsburgh Steel (now U.S. Steel). There were over 100 guests, all in medieval costume – prompting a run on Malabar's, the theatrical costume house. It was mid-summer, a hot and humid day, with groaning boards of medieval consumables, a treasure hunt, live music, and in the early stages it was felt that some sort of short dramatic presentation was in order. Our host made the suggestion of St. George, and I was persuaded to write it. The play had to be short, have minimal rehearsal and be adaptable for indoors or outdoors –

Backwoods: And adaptable to the various talents and 'party moods' of the participants, one would assume?

Bill: You assume correctly. It had to be simple so the audience could pick up the idea quickly. I used the basic rhythm of the period – di-da-di-da-di-da-di-da – because it's easy and recognizable. Sure, it's an anachronism in daily life but so was the whole event, like theatre itself. It required a willing suspension of disbelief. The simpler the form, the faster people will adjust and catch on.

Backwoods: Was it difficult to write in this style?

Bill: No. I love the language, throwing in the odd word which is not in current usage. I'm a bit of an anachronism myself, you see. Frankly, I loved the challenge, to write in a completely different form.

I must confess, though, here and there, "the verse was bended...."!

Backwoods: Has the play been changed at all from its original form?

Bill: Yes. The play had to be adapted to permit its second public performance at our son's grade five medieval feast as some of the original lines were not deemed 'age appropriate'. For instance, the Horse's original lines (yes, the Horse has lines. So does the



Dragon.): "Some day he'll come to realize / that twixt his legs he has a prize" needed modification, as did the closing lines "And finally our two young lovers / will find some peace between the covers" which became "...will soon become significant others". Also, some lines were already dated, such as the Princess's "I fear he's

grotty to the max", Valley-Girl speak of the early '80's not comprehensible to today's junior audience. Even with the changes, the principal felt the need to explain, after hearing the Horse: "and they call me the silly ass" that an ass was a biblical beast of burden.

Backwoods: Why does it work?

Bill: It's timeless; it's simple; it's fun for both the cast and the audience (I hope); and it doesn't take itself too seriously.

Backwoods: When will George make his appearance again?

Bill: When six or seven like-minded souls assemble and feel the urge to have a go.

Backwoods note: *The play, St George and the Dragon, is billed as a mid-summer mummery. It was performed without rehearsal to delighted audiences at the museum during History in Action and at the Greenwood Community Fun Day.*

Featuring:	George: Joe Bezubiak
	The Dragon: Josée Caron
	The King: Catherine Hodge
	The Princess: Alison Bezubiak
	The Horse: Finlandia Casellas
	The Wizard: Bill Sharp

Just Axe Us!

Backwoods, in cooperation with Education Staff at the Pickering Museum Village, offers to answer those questions that really 'stump' you.



The first question is, "Why are young boys called "whippersnappers"?"

- a) they liked to snap their suspenders to show off once they were 'out of short pants'
- b) they liked to snap their whips to show off the way a teenage boy today might 'lay rubber'
- c) they liked to snap their chewing gum behind the rumps of skittish horses to try and make them bolt

(Are you stumped? Turn to the back page for the answer.)

OVATIONS!

Ovations in our first season for:

- ◆ Artistic Director Bill Sharp for our brilliant debut production of Lights! Camera! Murder!;
- ◆ Larry O'Leary, doting godfather to Backwoods and director of yet another successful run of A Spirit Walk;
- ◆ Dr. Tony Steyn for taking on the roles of not one, but two characters (Asher Willson and the Chief Justice) in A Spirit Walk in less than a week's notice;
- ◆ Barb Vranic, costumes mistress for A Spirit Walk for her outstanding efforts in combining historical accuracy and comfort to those actors 'outstanding in the woods!' Watch for a profile of Barb in the spring newsletter!

Don't be shy!

(unless you want to be!)

Although Backwoods Players is barely half a year old, we are a growing group. It seems the old stump is sending out roots and off-shoots. We are now up to forty-three members: 32 individuals, 4 family memberships; and one honorary member – Larry O'Leary.

Membership costs \$2 per year for an individual and \$5 for a family. You do not need to act to be in Backwoods, but you are required to be a member of Backwoods to act in one of our productions. If you are camera-shy or audience-shy but would still like to be involved we have a plethora of jobs for you. Costumes, props, lighting, music, making fish, holding barn doors, the list goes on and on. Whatever your talent, skill or interest, Backwoods has a place for you!

Members are entitled to vote at the Annual General Meeting in April, receive newsletters and are welcome to audition for Backwoods productions. For more information on becoming a member, please call Julie Oakes at 905-728-6953, or e-mail at gcoakes1@idirect.com, or leave a message at the Pickering Museum Village.



Hold onto your hats

and your wigs and pince-nez!



Don't toss that bowler or give the shove to that shirt-waist dress. Save those high-button boots, those velvet curtains, that fox-fur stole. Keep all those props, costumes and knick-knacks for

Backwoods! We don't have storage room to spare at the museum (yet!) so keep them handy in your own personal Tickle Trunks, please. And remember, for next summer's Whodunit?



--think Edwardian!

T-SHIRTS

Wear your heart on your sleeve and your stump on your heart with a handsome Backwoods Players' T-shirt. Printed in 'serene green', the shirts are available at cost for Backwoods' members. Call John Edmonds at 905-723-0927 to order yours now. Coming next year -- Spirit Walk T's! Do you prefer black or red? Cast your vote with a member of the Backwoods Executive.

Dear Larry...

*All your friends, old and new, send very best wishes for a speedy recovery.
Can't wait to see you back on your feet again!*

Backwoods Players

WHODUNIT?

BACKWOODS DUNIT!

By MARY DELANEY, Publicity, Backwoods Players

The Pickering Museum Village Backwoods Players took flight on July 7 with Lights! Camera! Murder!, a Whodunit by Partners in Crime, presented as a fund-raiser for the Pickering Museum Village Advisory Committee.

Backwoods was formed this spring as the natural offspring of A Spirit Walk, the museum's annual theatrical production performed in conjunction with Larry O'Leary's School of Drama. Meetings were held, a constitution was drawn up, an executive was formed, made up of a wonderfully complimentary group of museum staff and volunteers plus supporters who are brand new members of our ever-growing community. Mary Cook developed our logo, the dual masks of comedy and tragedy set against the symbol of the backwoods, the ubiquitous stump.

Bill Sharp, artistic director of Backwoods, orchestrated Lights, Camera, Murder! with a brilliant eye and an impeccable sense of timing—just as well, since we had exactly one week to rehearse! President Catherine Hodge dripped charm and melodrama as the be-turbaned heroine of the piece, a 1923 film shoot of an 1890's western taking place in our pioneer village. Confused? Good – you would fit right in to the mood of this wacky, pun-laden spoof!



Jasmine

The paying guests, called 'extras', were ordered around the set by the propman (teacher Lindsay Howlett), stuntman (OPG employee Joe Bezubiak) and director (printer John Fitzgerald). Extras had to be careful not to interrupt the canoodling couple Odet (Jeremy Lapalme) and Isabella (Amanda Sloan), both outstanding young actors with Larry O'Leary. They had to beware not to trip over the drunken Rory McShea (high school principal and BWP's vice-president, John Edmonds) or get in the way of yours truly, Prudence Fairweather, as she raced after yet another piece of 'dirt' for her gossip column. PMV's blacksmith, Ron Plummer, was gentlemanly to all and sundry as the producer, especially when it came to the glam money-bags behind the shoot, played by BWP's treasurer and museum staff member, Angela Steyn. And was that a hint of brilliance or insanity that glinted in the eye of Francine (Charlene Lapalme)? Did anything at all glint in the eye of the star-struck starlet Jasmine (played with hilarious effect by Finlandia Casellas) or was that cloche hat squeezing a bit too tight on that tiny little brain?



Francine

The cast had only slightly more fun than the 'extras', especially after all the blocking was turned on its head at the performance when, for the first time, 80 people were added to the set. At times the 'extras' in their enthusiasm to discover 'whodunit' called out questions before the actors, arrived at scenes before the actors, and even vaulted over benches in their zeal.

!!!!!!!**News Flash from Prudence Fairweather to Loyal Readers of 'Behind Closed Doors'** –This just in -- word has been leaked by Partners in Crime that next summer will reveal another dead body at the Museum Village! See you there!

From a Seed . . .

(continued from page 1)

Christmas pudding, and as kindly Mr. Smith working diligently at his forge. It began slipping into conversations more regularly. An accent here, a stiffening of the posture there. It was the art of first person interpretation, and its potential could no longer be denied. The authentically furnished homes in the village deserved life within their walls once more. And the staff and volunteers at Pickering Museum Village were only too happy respond. How many times have so many of us squinted as our eyes imagined activity beside the hearth, a mother darning socks, her children's heads bowed as they laboured over lessons by the dim light of a tallow candle, father reading from the Bible, or perhaps a rare newspaper? How many times had we envisioned ourselves bringing those wistful imaginings to life for the public to enjoy as much as we had?

A Spirit Walk was the first attempt to draw visitors into the interpretative potential of historical drama. Training that taught the volunteers how to develop a first person character, and perform first person interpretation soon followed. Close on its heels was the introduction of a Christmas event performed in first person interpretation. It wasn't just the staff and volunteers who were hooked; so were the visitors. The events featuring drama quickly became the most popular events offered by the museum. And from those humble beginnings emerged the rapidly solidifying idea that a theatre company could be formed to support drama and first person interpretation at the museum. Larry O'Leary, the director of A Spirit Walk was the first to voice the idea. It quickly gained support. Staff and volunteers who had shown interest in theatrics were called together and within months, *Backwoods Players* was founded.

...To a Stump!

Finding a name that suited a theatre company within a museum was an enjoyable challenge. So many ideas flowed forth. In the end, *Backwoods Players* seemed the most fitting. Pickering Township, in its earliest inhabitation was considered the "backwoods" of Upper Canada. Those residing in the finer towns and cities of Kingston and York, considered the less populated regions of the colony backwards, as they looked haughtily down their noses at the rural folk sporting calloused hands, and clothed in coarse "linsey-woolsey". What thought, if any, was given to the hours spent cutting down trees, their stumps left forgotten in the settlers' haste to plant the wheat and potatoes which would be the sole sustenance for the coming winter? "How appalling", instead, was the thought provoked by the sight of these stumps, left to rot, not forgotten, but ignored, as the settlers turned their attention instead to the construction of full log dwellings to keep their families warm in the chill of the long Canadian winters. And still there stood the stumps, years later, testament to hardy determination to win the battle against nature and forge a new life in a new land, slowly decaying into the ground from which the tree first sprang.

If the stump was the settlers' monument, their symbol of victory, it was also the reminder that nature could never be completely dominated but sometimes must simply be endured. Taking not just years, but sometimes decades to rot, the ubiquitous stump provided a backdrop for life in the early development of rural communities, just as it provides a backdrop for our company. And so, the humble stump was the perfect choice to represent a fledgling theatre company, quite possibly the first to be formed by a museum.

Spirit Walk 2001

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the raw material for much of the script. Descendants of the Majors have done likewise.

Doug Willson, direct descendant of Asher Willson, was thrilled to see a dramatic scene from his family history brought to life in the back garden of Miller-Cole House, as three members of the Willson family were arrested on Boxing Day, 1838. The 'Arrest of the Willsons' had been in the planning stages for some time but only became possible when volunteer Ed Cammack led the construction of stairs and railing down into the orchard for the final scene at the fire pit.

At the firepit a new character was added, along with a stunning focal point to the final powerful moments of the play. Chief Justice John Beverly Robinson, resplendent in full robes and wig, passed sentence of death in the shadow of a towering gallows and noose constructed by Joe Noordman.

For the first time ever non-Museum Hannahs and some child-actors playing her daughter, Laura, were added to the cast, proof that we have indeed come a long way from the day's when the Spirit Guide had to be a staff member in case she was called upon to deliver an impromptu dissertation on road allowances to fill time when scenes went amiss.

No, indeed. Or, as Captain Law would say, "Nay!" We are not rank amateurs any longer
 – we are the ***Backwoods Players!***

Answer to 'Just Axe Us!' - (b)