



Interview with **Carolynn Wilson**

**Discussing the topics of the Old
Durham Road Pioneer Cemetery
near Priceville and the Sheffield Park
Black History Park Museum move to
Clarksburg**

Interview by Naomi Norquay

Naomi Norquay: This fall marks the 20th anniversary of the rededication of the old Durham Road Cemetery, and I guess I'm curious to know and our readers will want to know, how did you get involved in that reclamation project?

Carolynn Wilson: Around 1989, Mr. MacKinnon met with my Uncle Howard, myself, my sister Sylvia, and my mom, Yvonne, at a little meeting in Priceville. They were looking for evidence of people who were linked to the cemetery. They thought that perhaps it would add credibility. At that time, there was a committee of June McLaughlin and a couple of other folks there.

N: So he sought you out?

C: Yes, I believe he did. They knew that there were Black pioneers in the area and they looked around to add to the committee. And Jean Hutchinson, she and her husband were part of it at that time.

N: So how is your family connected with the Old Durham Road?

C: Well, a few of our folks are buried in that cemetery.

N: Okay, and the family was...?

C: We're looking for the name Sheffield. We believe Debra Sheffield was a young girl buried there, and we're looking for her stone.

N: Okay, so that's Howard and your mom's family?

C: Yes, that's the link there. We also would be related to the Handy family. Actually, there are a number of families there who are linked, but when we found the stone of Mr. Handy, Sylvia traced him to one of our ancestors.

N: I see, so do you know anything about those ancestors?

C: We do know some oral information about them, and we're searching through the nineteenth-century census periods. We do know that they were in the area and moved to Collingwood and the Owen Sound area and had families. They intermarried. We know that a lot of our folks are buried, perhaps, at the back of their property, and particularly on that lot where the cemetery is.

N: Do you know where the family property was?

C: We know where the Sheffield family property was on that road. Wonderful Mr. Lloyd Vause walked us along there several years ago, and he befriended us and I have a picture of Howard standing by the post. It's just cater-corner to the cemetery and actually, it brings it closer to home for us. We were hoping some day to buy it, but perhaps someone has already purchased it. It's just good to know that the lot is there.

N: You have connections to original settlers. Do you have any connection with descendants other than your immediate family?

C: Yes we have. I guess by looking at another area near there, we're connected, through intermarriage, to the Wilsons. Tracing some of our heritage, we learned that a lot of our folks raised some of our people. I guess if they were ill or dying, they would will their family members to some of our pioneers there in that community.

N: I see. Did your initial family come from the United States?

C: We believe we have links from the U.S. and also from England. They came up through [the] Garafraxa Trail, through Erin and Fergus and some were born in Erin and Fergus. They intermarried, and sometimes the names changed.

N: So, Les MacKinnon got you on the committee?

C: Mr. MacKinnon looked for us. It's amazing! We have great respect for the work he did, and for those who stood up to prove that we were there and had a right to be.

N: So I guess you're the head of the current cemetery committee.

C: I am one of the committee members. We always try to keep it broad. We're all equal... But I am the president of the Old Durham Road Pioneer Cemetery Committee.

N: Can you tell me a little bit about the ongoing work that you are doing?

C: Yes, I can. I'd be pleased. First of all, working with the committee has been harmonious. We've always kept the local council members of the municipality informed since the beginning, since that meeting we had about finding our stones. We have kept them informed. We thought awareness would be important, so we have had several information meetings at the site. Presently we are working on renovating the entire monument display. It's over twenty years old now and the wood is in disrepair and needs repair.

N: You are talking about the four stones that are on display?

C: Yes. I am speaking about the four stones underneath the frame, and we're looking at expanding it a bit, to make it approachable. So people could read it, making it a little broader, and just trimming up around the stone and enhancing everything. So, this week, we are meeting as our committee to look at the suggestions that we've received. From that point, we'll look at three quotes and then a submission to the Ontario Trillium Foundation, if that will work.

N: To get some grant money?

C: Some grant money or funding of our own.

N: In the last couple of years, you have added something new, which are the wooden crosses with names. Can you tell me about that?

C: The wooden crosses with names... that came, I think, from Sylvia, who suggested it at one meeting and we all just discussed it. We liked the idea of having something visual. Other members pointed out that people driving along the road would look over if they saw the crosses. We also had a deeper thinking: it would also add credibility that people were buried there, so more people would be aware of the cemetery since the stones are still mostly missing.

N: How did you gather those names?

C: We went to the census here in the Collingwood Library and people such as yourself gave us some names, and we knew a lot of oral history. By checking the census for names and library books, we went through where they lived. Sometimes the assessment rolls have a lot of the names of the people, so we gathered quite a few. We

have quite a few more names to put on. Our question was, “Would we just rely on those in the cemetery?” We felt that would limit us and how could we know for sure, so we thought we’d include Priceville and area.

N: So more than the Durham Road?

C: Yes, because there could be others there that we don’t know.

N: Are there more plans? Plans beyond renovating?

C: Yes, plans beyond renovating. We planted trees a couple of years ago. We’re looking at another dedication service, and we’ve been working with the church, the Gentle Shepherd Community Church. They have hosted a lot of our presentations. So, in that way, I think - also looking back to when the former Lieutenant Governor Lincoln Alexander was there - I think we have to look forward to having something there at the site again... but something unique, to celebrate.

N: Something that might involve someone from the government?

C: Yes, and we’ve often had plans for concerts. We’re limited with the site weatherwise, but we’ve held concerts at some of the churches that have focussed on the cemetery.

N: Could you say a little bit about why a cemetery is an important historical artefact?

C: I’ll try and do my best. I remember Mr. MacKinnon’s words at one time out in the public saying “I can walk to my cemetery and see the names of my folks on stones and Carolynn Wilson can’t, or others can’t.” I remembered that and I thought how wonderful it was for others to speak in the community about that, about the importance of a cemetery. First of all, for us, if we had a cemetery we would know who our relations are, when we came, we would know who we were marrying. Often times there were links [but] we didn’t know who everybody was. A cemetery provides information or links, evidence for the future.

N: So there’s a piece around genealogy.

C: Yes. There’s a piece around genealogy and also a piece around respect and an issue of honour. We like to honour our folks, and this is one way, a visual way, we can let them into our hearts. Many times our folks would plant trees if they knew they couldn’t put up stones. In the past we could always go to that resting place. We also have a religious belief in the hereafter for our folk. So it’s a calming feeling that all is well, and that we are the caretakers looking after not only our own, but having a respect for everybody’s cemeteries.

N: Certainly, generally in our culture, it goes without saying that we respect our cemeteries.

C: Yes, we do.

N: We do, whether we have religious beliefs or not.

C: Agreed.

N: We understand the cemetery as a hallowed resting place.

C: Yes, a hallowed resting place.

N: So you're saying, there's a genealogy piece, there's the piece in terms of having that final resting place of peace. Is there also something about the way in which the Old Durham Road Cemetery has become a marker of a community that's been denied?

C: Absolutely. And that part of it too, is in the restoration of it. It also gives us energy and encouragement that we are loved and that we are respected, that we did contribute. We weren't just left behind. We're a somebody, and we can go forward. If you haven't got something in yourself, you feel you can't achieve, or you're not important. So there's the issue of self-esteem. [...] Our grandfather often said that he looked around and [asked], "Why aren't there more Black people in business?" He'd ask, "Why not?" And we asked the same question, and we looked around and there were a few, but we thought we needed encouragement, and when we looked back in our history for those who travelled to Grey County and are buried in that cemetery, they had skills of barn building and other skills of teaching, and so forth. So we can say we have those skills that they have. And so we go forward, if we can.

N: Your committee has done a lot of research in order to come up with names of families connected. The readership of our journal includes a lot of people who are generally interested in the history and quite a number of historians. Is there research that you'd like to see others do to help?

C: Yes, I would. In particular, I hear that you yourself are doing research. Something we'd like to say from our hearts: we encourage community folks, or families, or any individual to help with our history. We know that we cannot do it all ourselves. We also are gaining a sense of trust with our neighbours and friends, and I think that's been building. Many times, Black families weren't trustful of folks with our history and how it was seen, but we see that there is strength in working together and the information that others find certainly adds credibility to our work and who we are. So we support that very much.

N: When you were talking about when you put names on those crosses, you actually

spread the boundaries out beyond the Old Durham Road itself, so is research for the whole area of interest to you?

C: Yes. And I see the Journal and the writings and all the books that are coming from some of our folk historians, who are putting it together and tying it in. When we set that cemetery up, it wasn't just to be within that little perimeter. Our minds and hearts were wide open, thinking there's a whole area and world not just in that little corner or pocket, but it's the whole of Grey and Simcoe County, up to Bruce and ...

N: And Wellington as well.

C: Absolutely. And Corbetton. So we felt that through history so many travelled in the area and in the community. Their involvement with our families and the unheard conversations that we haven't known about, we're hearing about now; people saying, "I remember, my great-grandmother used to know [such and such]". An elderly lady told us, in an old tree she remembers her folks hiding Black refugees in the area. And I'm looking at this woman and I'm saying, it's right there and it's in broad daylight.

N: So there's not only archival historical work to be done, there's oral history to be done.

C: Yes there is. I'm just going to add... the stones... we haven't forgotten our mission to locate those missing stones. We have been using a little different strategy, relying on people's interest and awareness, and through friendship, that their conscience might encourage somebody to come forward.

N: Okay.

C: Because our tenure, our lifetime may be gone, but we are hoping that others will continue the search. We'd like to realize the monuments back.

N: I don't know what the term is, *détente*? It's about building community trust so that those who either took the stones, or somehow have inherited them because they have purchased a property that harbours them, that they see that giving them back is actually something positive.

C: Yes, it would be. We would be very receptive. I think when things have happened in past, there's a fear now of retaliation. Our focus is the community, being aware and encompassing everybody, it has to be friendship and love first. And we do hope in our lifetime to have stones returned. We've lost a few of our folks already, but we'd like to realize that the stones will be there at some point in the near future.

N: Sort of like a mini South African Truth and Reconciliation Committee.

C: That's been our thinking, and also Mr. Prince, when he speaks, he often says: "If anyone has any knowledge, we'd like to try to bring this to a finality. Just put the stones, or the monuments on the property, or contact the church. Just drop them off." And we do know that they are still buried, but we just felt, it's just like they are still floating... looking for... looking for a family member.

N: Recently, you have moved your museum, Sheffield Park, to Clarksburg. Can you tell me about that?

C: Yes, I would be glad to. Sylvia Wilson and myself, we decided we wanted to keep Uncle Howard's vision alive, and perhaps it was time for change from the one site. Signage was one of the difficulties.

N: How was it difficult?

C: Well, we couldn't get a sign on our property on the highway where our park was. We qualified for a tourism sign...

N: And the municipality wouldn't give it to you?

C: They felt it didn't fit the image. So we just felt that that was just a little challenge. We just rose above it. So, all that's past history. We looked for sites in Collingwood and found a location that had a museum designation, but then those officials said it was a mistake on the official plan. We went out to Stayner and Clearview. We were looking to the [Blue] Mountains and we thought perhaps somewhere in the area of Thornbury, and up came a piece of land, it hadn't been listed. We went and looked at this piece, and it was the old Nazarene Church Campground. Sylvia and I stepped on the land, and we said "This is home!" It's about eleven acres, treed... very much like Sheffield in Collingwood. There are buildings on it, and we felt that it would be a tribute to Howard and the folks' community, and our own descendants to follow up and keep going. We moved our monuments to the property. There are five buildings, now opened with a heritage walk. Next year we're hoping to save the tabernacle, it's about 60 by 80 feet. It's a wonderful building: high ceilings and a large kitchen mess hall.

N: Are you open to the public?

C: We've been open now for about three months. We've called it a heritage walk which includes our displays of the Great Lakes, the boats, marine history, a sports' building is open with Ray Lewis, hockey players, etc. We've also opened four other buildings. They were old cabins that the girls renovated, [they] took bunk beds out. So we have four buildings you walk through... big fair size... and you'll walk through the old-fashioned kitchen, dining room, parlour. We've put up pictures of the Black pioneers from the area, and we have a building set up as a church. We link the Old Durham Road Pioneer's Cemetery in there with pictures from the cemetery.

N: Is it still called the Sheffield Park?

C: Yes, we continued our name, Sheffield Park, Black History and Cultural Museum. As I said, our grandfather said, “Why not have our people in business?” And then he opened a restaurant called Sheffield Cedar Inn, and then, there was Sheffield Park, which we opened up as a tent and trailer [park]. We kept that name, and when that closed about ten years ago (they were putting in new septic beds up the road in Grey, so we had to close it, it damaged our business), but we kept the name and added the Black history museum. We just assimilated into a museum, and so we’ve already had experience of changing a park into a museum.

N: And so you are doing it again?

C: We are doing it again.

N: How does this museum connect to your work with the cemetery?

C: I believe that we’re a visible connection to the cemetery. We actually have descendants working at the museum. So, we’re linked to the cemetery. We’re also going to add a little cemetery there on the site, a little mock one with crosses. We have three names: Douglas, Green and Thomas.

N: For that area?

C: For linking some of them that came to the Collingwood area, and also as a springboard at our museum for Oro-Medonte, because we are also linked there. So we believe that the museum would be perhaps inspiration for others too if they have history, if they wish to share it and show it somewhere for safekeeping, instead of throwing it out. If it goes to other area institutions for safekeeping that is wonderful, but there may be a lot of our folks who do not think that what they have is important.

N: Is there anything else you would like to relay to our readers?

C: Yes, I would. I would like to relay [thanks] to your readers and the folks who are writing for the Journal, and the Grey Roots folks, just naming a few - I can’t name them all.

N: No, you can’t ...it’s a growing group.

C: It’s a growing group.

N: Which is exciting!

C: There is so much information out there that we are trying to tap into. Today you're adding a little bit of our little point of view, but we are very grateful for the strides of others. We are very grateful for recognition, for the visibility and the sensitivity people have in showing that they do care and understand our people. Sometimes, we have mixed feelings in ourselves. Sometimes we have feelings we can't always relate to community folks with our inner soul, but we try to bridge those feelings and gaps and communicate. I just want to say, we're grateful.

N: And I'll say on behalf of all the people I know doing work here, that we're very grateful for the work that you do with the cemetery. It's motivational.

C: That's the word!!