

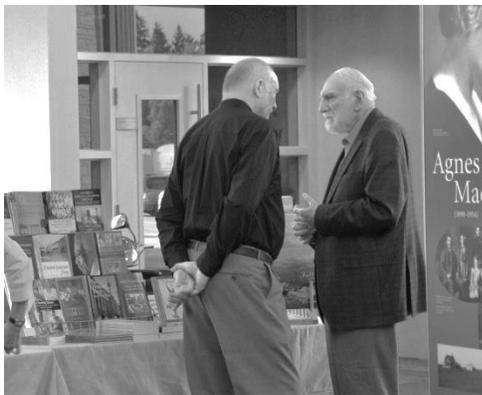
151st Emancipation Celebration Festival

August 2nd – 3rd, 2013

Grey Roots Museum & Archives and Harrison Park, Owen Sound

Shannon Wardell¹

Emancipation Festival Grand Opening – 11th Annual Speaker's Forum



Les MacKinnon and Barry Penhale

The evening of Friday, August 2nd marked the Grand Opening of the 151st Emancipation Festival and the 11th Annual Speaker's Forum. Since last year's festival marked the milestone of the 150th anniversary, this year's festival was a slightly more modest celebration by comparison, yet still a very enjoyable and informative event. It was a beautiful evening at Grey Roots Museum and Archives, with lovely music, a wonderful display of artwork, interesting presentations from author and historian, Les MacKinnon, and award-winning actor, writer, director, and producer, Anthony Sherwood.

Since 1862, the festival has drawn people from near and far to beautiful and scenic Grey County to celebrate our ties to African-Canadian history at the farthest Northern Terminus of the Underground Railway. Visitors find this celebration to be an opportunity to reconnect with family and friends, as well as a time to learn more about the history of the Underground Railway, their ancestors, the Black Pioneers in the area, and most importantly, emancipation.

The weekend-long event began with the musical stylings of the talented Rob Green, a former resident of the area. His music provided a very gentle and soothing atmosphere as guests gathered at Grey Roots to celebrate the Festival Opening. As Green performed, guests could choose to relax with a glass of



Musician Rob Green entertains

¹ All article photos also taken by author Shannon Wardell.

wine from Coffin Ridge Winery and enjoy the music, or peruse the Emancipation Art Exhibit, “Snapshots: Moments in our History.” The art exhibit highlighted some of the important moments of our African-Canadian history, ranging from very moving depictions of slavery to beautiful portraits, and even included a painting of Michelle Obama. There were several pieces from many talented artists, including Patricia Neely-McCurdy, Bonita Johnson-deMatteis, and Susan Johnson Washington, to name a few.

Musician Rob Green’s songs appropriately touched on his family’s history with the Emancipation Festival, as well as the recent and emotional passing of his mother. Before performing his final song “Soul Dancing,” he informed the audience that this was an emotional song that had a way of making special things happen just by whispering the lyrics. He then invited the guests to join in the chorus. As the guests quietly sang the chorus, the sun started to shine through the skylights above and down onto the audience. It was truly a beautiful and moving moment.



Arlene Wright and Blaine Courtney

Bill Walker, the MPP for Bruce-Grey-Owen Sound, and Arlene Wright, Owen Sound City/County Councillor, each gave their opening remarks in support of the importance of the Festival to our area. They extended best wishes for the continuing success of the Festival. The official welcoming message was delivered by Blaine Courtney, Board Chair of the Emancipation Festival. The Master of Ceremonies for the evening was Barry Penhale.

Les MacKinnon, author and historian, was the first presenter of the evening. He spoke about the book, *Broken Shackles* and his efforts to make the second edition of the book true to the original story. The first edition of “Broken Shackles” was published in 1889, and he had a very fragile original edition with him. The second edition was not published until 2001. *Broken Shackles* was an oral story told to a man in Owen Sound at the time. Despite the fact that the author spoke to the publisher, advising him that the Black pioneers did not speak with any accent, the book was published to make it seem as though they had very strong accents and were not well-spoken. MacKinnon wanted to get rid of this stereotype in the second edition and republish it the way it was meant to be. The book tells the story of “Old Man” Henson born in 1802, and his journey from slavery to freedom. MacKinnon also wanted to raise consciousness of the early African-Canadian pioneers in the area. He also spoke about the documentary film,



Les MacKinnon holds up the original *Broken Shackles*

Speakers for the Dead. This documentary highlights a community that tried to hide its Black history ties, to make it appear as though African-Canadians were never actually there, by hiding

the remnants of the Black cemetery. The documentary remembers these African-Canadian individuals and families, and educates viewers on where these residents came from, and what they did when they were here.

Barry Penhale introduced the second speaker of the night, Canada's own award-winning actor, writer, director, and producer, Anthony Sherwood. Sherwood shared his experiences in dealing with racial discrimination while trying to pursue a career in acting. Sherwood grew up in a family household of nine. His Canadian mother is Black, and his Jamaican father is white. "Normal" stereotypes did not exist in this household. Six members of his talented family pursued careers in music. Five of the six formed the musical group, "The Sherwoods." Sherwood's aunt, Portia White, became the first famous Black opera singer in Canada.



**Master of Ceremonies,
Barry Penhale**

Anthony Sherwood started his acting career in musical theatre. He performed in plays from all different genres, from comedy to drama.



Anthony Sherwood shares his story

There weren't a lot of Canadian television or film opportunities in the late 1970s. Commercials were a popular way for most Canadian actors to find jobs. The advertising industry tried to steer Sherwood away from his pursuit to find employment in doing commercials because advertisers did not want "visible minorities selling their products." After being turned down by advertisers, Sherwood went from actor to activist and started the Black Actors Association of Montreal. Due

to his role in the association, he was blacklisted for two years. Eventually, a move was made that changed the face of Canadian television.

In 1986, he had his first big break on a television show entitled "Airwolf." This show was later cancelled as it was deemed too expensive to film. At the time, it was the most expensive television series, at a cost of one million dollars an episode. Next, he landed the role of a Crown Attorney on "Street Legal", where he made headlines as part of the first ever inter-racial relationship portrayed on television in North America. As Sherwood modestly put it, he was in the "right place at the right time." Since that time, he has worked and met with many accomplished



Anthony Sherwood in Street Legal

individuals, including Jamie Lee Curtis, Burt Reynolds, and Anne Murray.

In 1991, Sherwood formed Anthony Sherwood Productions to make films and documentaries that would inform people of the African-Canadian culture and experience. His first film, “Music: A Family Tradition” won a Gemini award and was nominated for an international Emmy award.



Anthony Sherwood displays a photograph of Reverend William White

Things weren't as easy after that however. Even though he was now an award-winning producer, he had trouble finding someone to produce his next film, “Honour Before Glory.” The film tells the controversial story of Sherwood's Great-Uncle William White, a Baptist Minister, who was, as Sherwood described, “determined to fight for his country” but was turned away from the army because of the colour of his skin. Reverend White administered a movement to allow Black soldiers to join the Canadian Army and the No. 2 Construction Battalion

was formed. This battalion was Canada's only all-Black military battalion in the First World War. Finally, Black soldiers were allowed to join the army although they were still not able to fight alongside the white soldiers. Reverend William White became the only Black chaplain and Black Commissioned Officer in the British Royal Forces, although, all officers in charge of the No. 2 Construction Battalion had to be white. William White's story was an important one to tell, and yet no one wanted to make the film, because it was too controversial and made white Canadians look bad. The story was purposely hidden from all Canadians. Black soldiers went and fought for our country, and died, and Canadians didn't even know. The film was finally completed after a struggle to get the funds. It went on to win a Gemini Award, and a Hollywood Black Film Festival Award, but most importantly, it touched many lives and made known a very important story of our past.

Sherwood has continued to produce documentaries, many focusing on human rights and social justice. He has continuously put his life in danger to tell the stories, whether it was a film about landmines, or one about Jamaican Youth Violence. Anthony Sherwood came to the realization that everyone has a purpose in life. His purpose was far beyond acting; it was to tell important stories that needed to be told.



Anthony Sherwood and Blaine Courtney (left)

Ancestor's Breakfast and the 151st Emancipation Picnic

August 3rd was a beautiful day for the Ancestor's Breakfast and the Emancipation Picnic at

Harrison Park. The event started with a lovely pancake breakfast under the picnic shelter, followed by a trip to the Cairn. The sun was shining as the crowd gathered around the Cairn for a special presentation by the designer, Bonita Johnson-deMatteis, about its history and significance to the community. The Emancipation Festival committee was also proud to welcome Adrienne Barnette and Claire Huller, both educators and cyclists from North Carolina, to the community. Barnette and Huller wanted to educate their students about slavery and decided to bike from Ohio to Owen Sound following the Underground Railway route to learn more about it themselves. While on their journey to the most northern terminus of the Railway in Owen Sound, they constantly took time to reflect on what the escaping slaves would have been thinking in certain situations. They were met with thunderstorms, driving rain, and heat, each time reflecting on how the slaves would have felt in these conditions. They were also met with the experience of leaving home to travel to the unknown, as the slaves did in their search for freedom. Barnette said it best; “it’s a really long way to come for something that should already be yours.”²

The Emancipation Picnic followed in the afternoon, with over 500 people in attendance. The first part of the picnic was a time for family and friends to reconnect with one another. Guests of all ages were in attendance, as there was a kids’ zone with games and crafts, as well as food and book vendors. There was even a booth set up for guests to share their own stories about Black history in Owen Sound as a way of preserving their memories for future generations. Music played into the evening with talented musicians such as Bobby Dean Blackburn. The day was full of food, music, races, and fun for the whole family. It was a great ending to another successful Emancipation Festival.

² Gowan, Rob. “Cyclists retrace Underground Railway route.” *The Owen Sound Sun Times* 6 August 2013: 1.