

# 147<sup>th</sup> Emancipation Celebration Festival

July 31 - August 2, 2009

Grey Roots Museum & Archives, Harrison Park, and the British Methodist Episcopal Church, Owen Sound

## Trevor Parsons and Karin Noble

The Emancipation Celebration Festival commemorates the British Commonwealth Emancipation Act of August 1, 1834. Owen Sound is in its 147<sup>th</sup> year of honouring this occasion, first with a picnic, but now with an entire long-weekend of events. This event is the longest running of its kind in Canada.



The festivities for 2009 commenced with a Speakers' Forum at 7:00 pm on Friday, July 31 amidst the rustic and homey atmosphere of the barn located in the Moreston Heritage Village at Grey Roots Museum & Archives. It was the start of a lovely weekend in Grey-Bruce, and as the sun set outside, in the distance, the headlights of numerous cars could be seen travelling the Owen Sound by-pass, carrying their passengers to weekend and holiday destinations.

The theme of the evening was "Community, Roots & Culture Perspectives" explored through "Word, Poetry, History & Song". Friendly and gracious, Barry Penhale of Natural Heritage Books, acted as MC for the evening. Lisa Scott, a member of the Board of Directors for the Emancipation Celebration Festival, welcomed attendees and introduced Owen Sound Mayor, Ruth Lovell-Stanners, who brought greetings on behalf of the City. The Grey County Warden, Kevin Eccles, also brought congratulations and wishes for a successful festival. Dennis Scott, Chair of the Emancipation Festival, thanked the Emancipation Celebration Festival Committee, Grey Roots Museum & Archives, and the City of Owen Sound.

He commented that it is the goal of the Festival Committee to further develop Canadian Minority History education and to get more stories into classrooms. He encouraged all to become a friend of the Emancipation Celebration Festival on Facebook.

Finally, acknowledgment of contributions of friends of the Festival who passed away this year was given: Gwen McQuilken (Green), Kay Scott-Gyles, Alan “Smoky” “Salty” Miller, Gladys Miller and June Heiple. May they rest in peace.

Following opening greetings and announcements, the audience was taken back to the era of the Underground Railroad by Leslie McCurdy and her one woman play *The Spirit of Harriet Tubman*. McCurdy entered portraying Tubman in her final years, singing the slave spiritual “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot”. (see Journal cover)

The play was an emotionally powerful and riveting representation of Harriet Tubman at various stages of her life, from her childhood in slavery, through her first marriage and escape to Canada, and her subsequent visits to the USA to aid other ex-slaves travelling the underground railroad, to her eventual retirement in a home for elderly African-Americans (which she had opened a few years earlier). As Harriet Tubman, McCurdy portrayed the many trials and tribulations faced by a slave along the road to freedom, and the racism present after emancipation. To find out more about *The Spirit of Harriet Tubman* and other projects by Leslie McCurdy, visit [lesliemccurdy.ca](http://lesliemccurdy.ca).

Following a brief intermission, MC Barry Penhale introduced Dr. Bryan Walls, recipient of both the Order of Ontario and the Order of Canada, and author of *The Road That Led to Somewhere*, a book about his ancestors’ journey to freedom along the Underground Railroad. Devoted to mutual understanding and reconciliation, Walls explained to the audience that *The Road That Led to Somewhere* is intended to be a story of man’s humanity, as opposed to man’s inhumanity, focusing on the people who helped his ancestors escape slavery, not pointing fingers at the slave-drivers themselves.

He expressed his conviction that all races have “dropped the ball” at one point or another, inflicting great inhumanity on other people and our mutual guilt is why finger pointing will not work to aid in diminishing racism.

*The Road That Led to Somewhere* contains stories told by Dr. Walls’ aunt, Stella Butler, who recalled the “thirst for freedom” held by fleeing slaves, which drove them on their road to “heaven” (a symbolic name for Canada). Founder of the John Freeman Walls Historic Site and Underground Railroad Museum in Puce, Ontario (near Windsor), Walls recalled that Rosa Parks came to this historic site for 14 consecutive years with students of peaceful resistance in the spirit of Martin Luther King. He considers John Grey Simcoe a personal hero.

Along with closing remarks and thanks from MC Barry Penhale, Dennis and Lisa Scott presented Leslie McCurdy and Mrs. Walls with bouquets, and Leslie McCurdy and Dr. Bryan Walls with Emancipation Celebration Festival recognition plaques.

The audience went home to rest up for the next day's 147<sup>th</sup> Emancipation Celebration Picnic at beautiful Harrison Park in Owen Sound, an event full of live music, especially R&B, soul and jazz. There were games and races for children, and vendors selling everything from cultural foods, to books, to crafts.



Mostly though, the event is a time to celebrate and relax with friends in a beautiful setting. Sunday rounded out the weekend with an Emancipation Gospel Explosion held at 2:00 pm at the British Methodist Episcopal Church.

In its 4<sup>th</sup> year, the Emancipation Art Festival was also on display at Grey Roots Museum & Archives from July 13 to September 8, 2009, as a complement to the Emancipation Celebration Festival. The exhibit, organized and curated by Bonita Johnson-deMatteis, celebrated African-Canadian creativity and culture, through fine art, sculpture, fine crafts, and film. *Relatively Speaking*, the theme of the exhibit, in the words of Johnson-deMatteis, “asked the artist to express how we will be



remembered, relatively speaking. How do we tell about our stories and our influences, using paint, sculpture, photography?” Also on display were the exhibits, *From Slavery to Freedom African Canadians in Grey County*, highlighting early Black pioneers in Grey County as well as their descendents (July 13 through September 13, 2009) and *Enslaved Africans in Upper Canada*, a travelling exhibit on loan from the Archives of Ontario (July 10 – August 30, 2009).

Remember to follow [emancipation.ca](http://emancipation.ca) for details about the 148<sup>th</sup> Celebration in 2010.