

“If we don’t try, then shame on us!”: An Interview with Janie Cooper-Wilson

Naomi Norquay¹

Naomi Norquay: I know you as someone who has very deep roots in Grey and Simcoe Counties in terms of your own family history, and also in terms of your dedicated work preserving African-Canadian heritage. I was wondering if you could start by telling me a little bit about your family’s historical roots.

Janie Cooper-Wilson: Well, they’re long. I always knew that on my dad’s maternal side, the ancestor came from Madagascar. That was one thing that was handed down and it was drilled into my head. I didn’t understand it as a child. I was very fortunate because two of my dad’s uncles and two of his aunties were still alive when I came along, and they were all well up in years. Back in those days kids were seen and not heard, so I ended up out on the back step when dad went to visit Aunt Liz in New Lowell, and Uncle Emmanuel used to watch over the brat.

NN: That would be you.

JCW: That would be me. Wilma Morrison still calls me “Brat”. When I was taken out to visit I had my best dress on and my white-ribbed stockings that I hated. I had to stay clean. I didn’t get to climb trees and all of that with my cousins. But I was just like a little sponge when it came to the history and that was the start of it.

NN: And what was the family name?

JCW: The Morgans. I really didn’t know a lot about my dad’s father’s people until I was a little older and I started asking questions – asking my grandfather questions. Little things that I never paid much attention to, and I guess most of us don’t, little traditions that we had in the family. I didn’t realize until many, many years later that these were all traditions that had been handed down. On his paternal side, the ancestor came from Bath so there were a lot of English traditions. The Malagasy traditions were carried through – in the way the house was built in



Photo of Janie Cooper-Wilson taken by
Grey Roots Museum & Archives

¹ All photos, except that of Janie Cooper-Wilson, courtesy of the J. Cooper-Wilson Collection

New Lowell – it was a shotgun house. And also, where the patriarch sat at the table, what the pecking order was around the table, who was served first, things like that. It was just our home. I didn't know a whole lot about my mother's family. Mama didn't talk a lot. I didn't understand why. And then, of course, I went through the years where kids were seen and not heard and so you didn't dare ask questions. I was raised to call everyone Aunt or Uncle, if they were in the immediate circle of elders in the community that I saw every day, at the Church, or Sunday School, or after a Lodge meeting, or whatever. If it was a new person that I was being introduced to they were to be addressed as Mr. or Mrs., so at one point I didn't know who was really my aunt and uncle, and who was a cousin, or who was a cousin two or three times removed, or whether they were related on mom's side or dad's side. I had a lot of time by myself as a kid because I was an only child and a very lonely child. My mother was very sick most of the time and she very much – how do I say – hated being ill. It went against everything – her whole being. She was active, she was a tomboy, she wanted to be out in the fields with my dad, she wanted to be doing things. And a lot of times that just was not possible. During those times, it was a matter of just going straight home, dropping my school books, doing my chores and only then, was I allowed to go and play. I had to forego a lot as a child to be close by, in case my mother needed me.

NN: Was this in New Lowell?

JCW: No, this was in Collingwood. And so, I read to pass the time.

NN: That wonderful world that kids can go to.

JCW: My dad used to talk in riddles and I didn't understand that. Even as a teenager I used to say, "Why can't I get a straight answer?" But what he wanted was for me to use my grey matter, because if he'd given me that answer without forcing me to think, I would never understand. Questions like – why are they keeping little bits of string? And why are they keeping the tabs off the bread bags? Why is there the sole of an old shoe? I didn't realize that that old sole, that old shoe, could be cut in half to extend the life of it, because they didn't have the money. Things like that. So then, when I became older I wanted to know about all those things. Again, as I said, Mama didn't talk too much about her family and so I sat there trying to figure it out. I was looking at all the colours of the rainbow, when it came to Mama's family: This is Mom's brother and this is Mom's brother, and this is Mom's sister, and Mom doesn't look like any of them, and this sister we barely see her and she sort of sneaks in and then sneaks out. She doesn't want anybody to see her. Things like that. I couldn't understand why this was happening. No one seemed to have a picture of Mom's father anywhere. No one wanted to talk about Mom's father. Why? Then I discovered he was a white man.

NN: And what was his name?

JCW: My grandfather's name was Donald Wellington Garbutt. He was born outside Guelph. As

a matter of fact, just last year I found his parents' graves in Thornbury, Ontario. In Ontario, there was a lot of mobility. People moved. We think that today with our cars and traffic jams, it's a hassle to get anywhere, and then we imagine they were on corduroy roads, or impassable trails, or shank's ponies. People got around.

NN: So, a while back you mentioned to me that the Morgans may have been in South Grey early, early on.

JCW: As the family tradition goes, when they escaped...

NN: And where did they escape from?

JCW: My two-times Great Grandfather was enslaved in Virginia. According to oral history, he came to Amherstburg, and from there he wandered from place to place until he could find a place to settle. Somewhere along the line he had heard about the settlement in the Priceville area.

NN: So when was that?

JCW: Well, he arrived in Sunnidale around 1829, but he and his wife had been living in the Minesing swamp outside of Fort Willow. Prior to that he lived in Holland Landing, south of Barrie.

NN: Where's Fort Willow?

JCW: It's at Minesing. With the tradition that I was raised to understand, on that initial journey they went up to the Priceville area and he didn't like it up there. Even to the day my dad died he said it was only fit for sheep. Which is true – it's rough.

NN: It's hilly. It's rocky. So that would have been before 1829?

JCW: Yes. So then they went back and settled in New Lowell. They were the first Blacks in New Lowell.

NN: And building the shotgun style house. Karolyn Smardz Frost talks about that in her book in terms of it coming from a West African word. 'Shogun', I think the word is. That's very cool. So, that's a little bit about the family history. When did you get involved in investigating Black history in Grey and Simcoe?

JCW: Again, I was always interested in history and as a child, I also loved to draw and paint to kill time and fill the hours. My cousin, Ruth Roberts, gave me a box of watercolors and I would

illustrate my school notebooks, by painting on little bits of cardboard covered with white paper. I was fascinated with the explorers. It never dawned on me: I did not know that my people were in chains in the holds of those great ships. We were always shown where our folks were buried and it's still a tradition now. We don't say, "We're going down to the cemetery".

NN: What do you say?

JCW: We say, "We're going to see the folks", because we feel they're with us all the time. At least I do. So, even if it was grass three feet high, we knew they were right there. But there again, in passing thought, we'd think something should be done about this. But it wasn't our responsibility and for us to move on it would have been disrespectful to the elders. That was their job, the adults' job.

NN: Is this Bethel Union you're talking about?

JCW: Yes, it is.

NN: So that was a cemetery you visited as a young person.

JCW: Yes, as a child. And I can remember my father had a '33 or '35 Packard and it was a big deal to go and visit the old folks at the homestead in New Lowell. We'd drive down on what was then called the Angle Road, now Creemore Avenue, cross the little wooden bridge and we'd stop into the cemetery. Dad would go ahead and break the path for us to go in because it was overgrown even then. And then we'd go on down the road. I can remember there were times we'd turn onto Creemore Avenue and Dad would turn back because we couldn't stand the smell of the stench.

NN: And what was the stench from?

JCW: That was the sunken graves. It was really, really bad.

NN: Why were the graves sunken?

JCW: One of the problems with Bethel Union is the creek that runs adjacent to it and there's a tributary that runs right underneath because the graveyard sits on a knoll. Many of the old folks were buried in a shroud, or in a pine box, so when that decayed, their graves would sink. It's all sand, of course, so they just fall in. It's very deceptive when the grass grows because you can't see the depressions in the ground.

NN: Can you still see them?

JCW: Occasionally. There are a few – I'm constantly filling them.

NN: So, did the Silver Shoe Historical Committee come first and then the reclamation of the cemetery follow?

JCW: No.

NN: So, can you tell me?

JCW: It started out with Janie going in one day to document where all the old graves were. I was really feeling my mortality and as I only have one child, I wanted her to know where all our people were. My only request of her was to go and visit them once in a while if anything happened to me. And I went in and I was absolutely horrified.

NN: Do you remember when this was?

JCW: That was in '97. So, of course, as my friends know, I can be really hot-tempered and one of the things I've had to learn over the years is to temper that temper. The inside of my lip bleeds a lot. I'm surprised that the police didn't catch me that day because I put my foot right to the metal. When I reached the mayor's office there was no waiting. I just barged in and my fist hit the table and I said, "What are you going to do about this?" He finally realized I was not taking no for an answer, I was not taking excuses, I wasn't having it. And I said, "Are you opposed if I put together a group and go in and clean it up?"

NN: And what did he say?

JCW: He said, "Sure, go ahead."

NN: So, the cemetery is owned by the municipality?

JCW: That's right.

NN: So, historically it has been their responsibility, which they have neglected.

JCW: Basically, yes! The Township did very little in the way of upkeep, until my organization got the ball rolling. Since then, their involvement has been minimal. Until October 26th, of this year [2015], when I made a deputation to Council requesting the Township to historically designate the site. I hope the Municipality will finally accept responsibility, for now they have finally officially acknowledged ownership. We've been doing this a long time and I know my enemy, which is one of the lessons my dad taught me – know your enemy, walk softly and carry a big stick. I didn't think for one second that we would get a unanimous vote.

NN: And why not?

JCW: Well, we knew we had some opposition.

NN: What were they opposed to?

JCW: In every community there's always that element that would like to see the African-Canadian aspect of history just go bye-bye. A few of the 'powers-that-be' tried over the years to put roadblocks in our way, but they didn't reckon on my tenacity.

NN: So, in '97, that's 18 years ago that you and your Silver Shoe group got started.

JCW: It started when I came out of the Mayor's office. I went right to my dad – he was in the barn and I called him out – and I said, "Come on in and get a coffee". I said, "I'm getting the gang together" and I phoned Gary Etheridge and Caroline Minnikin and Edlin Earll and I said, "I need you now at the farm." They all wanted to know if Dad was okay and I assured them he was fine, but I needed them at the farm right away. Right there and then we formed the Bethel Union Pioneer Cemetery Committee. So we operated like that until 2007. Karolyn Smardz Frost was Executive Director of the Ontario Historical Society at that time and she happened to stop by the cemetery one day while we were working there. One of the volunteers said, "There's a lady coming up the driveway. She's walking and she has flaming red hair!" That could only be one person, right? So, of course, I dropped everything and went to meet her. She said, "You know, you really need to incorporate to have the ability to raise funds." The little yard sales, tag days and the bake sales weren't enough to tackle a job as overwhelming as that place was when it came to heavy equipment and things like that. It wasn't too bad while I was living on the farm. I had those things at my fingertips. But once we had to start putting out tenders for different jobs, it was a little bit different. When I think back, I don't know how I stood it, because at one time, I used to cut all that grass myself.

NN: My gosh! That's a big cemetery! And cemeteries are hard to cut because of the stones.

JCW: It's true. Actually, that was the easy part. It was on the south-side where it was really bad. On the first day, when the Committee and the volunteers went in, we had about seventy-five people from the community there to help. I had contacted all the local media and I didn't even think about being politically correct, protocol, or anything. There was a job that needed to be done and I was absolutely appalled that it had been allowed to get to this state. The entire community rallied, including a number of businesses.

NN: That's fantastic.

JCW: Edlin and I remember three little old ladies with blue hair walked into the cemetery one day. One little lady said, "You know I'm on a limited income but here's seventy-five cents." It was mostly the donations like that - the quarters, nickels, and dimes – and the larger gifts and

donations that made the project a success. It was a community working together. We got there bright and early and we're standing there looking around where now the walkway is, and somebody said, "Well, where do we start?" I said, "Don't ask me, just have at it." Edlin Earll and I went in ahead of the team. They stretched the full depth of the cemetery and moved as one, with Edlin and I going ahead with machetes to cut away the brush. We didn't even know at that point if when we reached down to pick up a stick, we were picking up a snake instead. It was horrendous! There were car parts, there were old motors, every piece of garbage - all the flotsam and jetsam that you could ever imagine.

NN: So, it not only fell into neglect, it became a dumping ground.

JCW: It was, and a very convenient one.

NN: And convenient in maybe two ways? The one is, it's a place to dump stuff illegally, and the other thing is what the dumping covers up and obscures.

JCW: That's right. I don't know how many drug dealers I ran out of there. I definitely go in every Hallowe'en evening. I sit in the dark and wait. People say, "Aren't you afraid in there?" and I say, "Why should I be?" My ancestors know what I am trying to do and that is to give them dignity and respect, so I know they will protect me.

NN: When did the candlelight services start?

JCW: Immediately, as soon as we got that mess cleaned up. Because, when we started in there – and I know you've been there many times - it was like there was a heaviness. It's hard to explain. But it was almost like you wanted to hunch down because it was weighing down. It was so dismal.

NN: Now it's a beautiful place.

JCW: I love to just go down to Bethel Union just to sit. I never go there unless something is revealed to me. People frequently come there. I particularly remember one elderly couple. Unfortunately, the wife was dying with cancer, and when the husband would take her out for a ride, they often stopped in. This was around 2005 or 2006. She wasn't comfortable going to many places, but he would take her to Bethel Union because she found it so peaceful. That was the start of the first bench that the Silver Shoe Historical Society installed at the cemetery. We call it Uncle Bud's Bench. He would take her there and she loved it so much. I didn't know this at the time, but another elderly couple came to visit their grandparents' graves. They knew me, of course. So this gentleman with the sick wife asked them, "Who is responsible for this beautiful place?" They gave him my contact information. Charles 'Bud' Wass was a dear, sweet man. We called him Uncle Bud. He actually helped provide the new fence at the front entrance. The day that we put the team together to install that fence, one of our former members had a trailer. It

was early in May and it was still very cool. The trailer was brought to the site as a warming station. They cooked sausages, bacon and eggs, made sandwiches and had fresh coffee going all day. Uncle Bud was over 80, but he supervised those young bucks who were putting that fence in and flatly refused to come in out of the cold. So as a last resort I sent my granddaughter, Jai, to get him and bring him back to the trailer. She was six! He wouldn't come for anyone else and we were so worried about him. When he got into the trailer, his nose was literally turning blue. He passed away the following winter. His son told me afterwards that one of the last things he said before he died was, "Please tell Janie. She is going to be heartsick. And wish her a happy birthday."

NN: So, the cemetery really captured people's imagination and inspired them.

JCW: Yes. It just amazes us how the word has passed over the years. People come for comfort and no one seems to take offense. I went in there a couple of weeks ago and there was a woman in there with her dog. Of course I take Miss Myrtle with me all the time, but she either stays in the van, or she is tied and I always have the little bags. We don't like dogs running loose in there. We did have a problem for a while with people burying their pets. It's not a pleasant job exhuming them. We all felt badly, but this practice had to be stopped. I remember one little girl, who buried her pet there. She said, "Well, it was such a pretty place and she knew he (her dog) would have a nice place to rest." She didn't understand.

NN: So there's some public education that needs to be done about cemeteries in terms of what they are, their function, what they represent, what they mean historically – all those things.

JCW: What I've found is that there's one true fact: no one wants to think about death. No one wants to think about it until it's standing on their doorstep. And I find that strange because death is a part of life and if people really believe in an afterlife, if they believe in their Bible and that promise of a life after death, why is there fear? And they say in the Bible, if they have the faith of a mustard seed – then it's true. What we mourn is our loss - that separation from a loved one.

NN: My mom used to say that funerals are for the living.

JCW: That's right. And it's a necessary part of the grieving process. But so many people have come there and we never know what reaction we're going to have. We've had people go down under the power there. We've had people that are just overwhelmed with the sense of relief that the candlelight service gives them. We don't require people to name their loved one, nor do we need to know why they want to light a candle, but once you come to the candlelight service, you are part of the Silver Shoe Family.

NN: So tell me, it's the Bethel Union Cemetery, but can you please explain the Silver Shoe

name?

JCW: The Silver Shoe Settlement. If you look at a map of the area, it actually looks like a horse's hoof. Of course, with the railroad going through, there was the sparkling of the steel in the sunlight. But also, if you go into the cemetery at a certain time of the day when the sun is hitting the lichen on the ground in a certain way, it turns silver.

NN: So who came up with the name Silver Shoe?

JCW: It's age-old.

NN: So, is this about the settlement and the cemetery?

JCW: The settlement itself was The Silver Shoe and the cemetery is the nucleus of the settlement. But it's also its silver lining.

NN: So, the Bethel Union Cemetery isn't synonymous with Silver Shoe Settlement, but it's part of it.

JCW: I would say it is synonymous because beyond the registered part of the cemetery is the Old Burial Ground. Like in any pioneer community, they were burying their dead on the side of the road, they were burying them in their back yard. If someone fell out of grace - many illegitimate children, or someone who ran amok of the law for whatever reason - in those days, they were often buried on the side of the road, beyond sanctified ground. And in most Caucasian (white) cemeteries at the time, Blacks and Aboriginals were not considered proper enough to be buried within sanctified ground. We were heathens.

NN: And that's why there are many, many little Black burial grounds and cemeteries.

JCW: That's right. But the other thing is, Blacks tended to have their own church and cemetery, like in Oro. The communities were very tightly knit and they would only venture out of their community to work. There was one face that they had within their own culture, within their own community, and another face for the outside world. It was a survival technique. The other thing that many don't understand is, in the years when scientific medicine was all new, along with the criminals and those who were in the workhouse, their bodies were taken for experiment. If they couldn't get a fresh body, they'd hire "gravediggers" to dig up the fresh cadavers. So there were all kinds of measures taken to protect their loved ones, which could have accounted for why, even in freedom, many of the Blacks chose to camouflage their graves. You know, illiterate does not mean stupid. You've got to give it to African Canadians. Would we have the wits and the tenacity to survive what they went through?

NN: What do you think?

JCW: I don't think so. Of course, I wouldn't have lasted anyway.

NN: Why?

JCW: I would definitely be one of the ones that was whipped to death, or hung, or shot, because I would just refuse to tolerate that sort of thing.

NN: You'd be stomping into the overseer's office and pounding your fist on the table.

JCW: That's right.

NN: So, can you tell me – I guess the exciting news in your work these days has got to be the little Oro church.

JCW: Oh, absolutely.

NN: Can you tell me about how you got involved with that?

JCW: Well, I was asked in 2009 to be the MC for the 160th anniversary of the church. Mayor Harry Hughes asked me to do that, and I was quite surprised.

NN: Why?

JCW: Well, I try to respect my colleagues' domain, even though I had ancestors there. One of my ancestors was a trustee of the African Church, another was one of the nine soldiers from Runchey's Coloured Corps, that actually settled in Oro.

NN: Which one was that?

JCW: Private Samuel Thomas. And the trustee was Henry Montgomery. Oro had always been the domain of the Sheffield family, whom I highly respect.

NN: So they have Oro connections too?

JCW: Absolutely. That's how we (Carolynn and I) are connected. We actually share mutual ancestors - Charlie Thomas and Jane Bland Montgomery Thomas.

NN: They were related to Samuel Thomas?

JCW: Charles Thomas was the younger of his two sons. So, Carolynn and I are cousins: her mother, Yvonne and my grandmother, Bertha, were half-sisters. It's the unspoken rule: I would

no more intentionally push my way into Carolynn's work at Oro, than I would impose on your work at the Old Durham Road Site. I've always been available, whether it's been accepted or not, to assist wherever I'm needed. But the Mayor insisted that I do this and I have thoroughly, thoroughly enjoyed it. When the latest issue with the church hit the news, I was doing my dishes, listening to the news on the TV, when I heard "Oro African church". I immediately came out of the kitchen to watch and I saw that the church covered in Tyvek. So I got on the phone to the Mayor: "Harry, what's going on?" And he said, "Well, thank God you called me Janie, because I was going to be calling you."

NN: What was he going to tell you?

JCW: He wanted me to work on this project. So I said, "Just tell me what you need", and that was the way it started. Of course, there are those that feel it's just another photo-op for me, but I've been in front of cameras since I was 18 years old, so that doesn't mean anything – that's not important. The purpose of this and my involvement is to save that church for future generations.

NN: So, you did some crowd-funding. Is that right?

JCW: Yes.

NN: Tell me a little bit how that happened and what was the result of that?

JCW: When the Church project started there was very little money in escrow and what we had available wouldn't even touch it. It was in such a desperate state. Even if one thing was fixed, there were other areas that were so badly deteriorated that something more was needed. It was clear that a Band-Aid fix wasn't going to help matters. So, Samah Othman, Communications Officer for the Municipality, was given the job of setting up a Public Relations Initiative, through social media. Samah's a sweet girl, a sweet, sweet girl. The kid has done an amazing job! She's actually become like an adopted daughter to me. She is the same age as my Jo-Anne. She came up with the crowd-funding idea, and that's how my face came to be out there. Not as Janie Cooper-Wilson *per se*, but as a blood descendant. The public has been very positive overall, with the exception of a few rude and racist remarks made in response to a local newspaper article about the Church. Statements were made about how the Black people didn't care – that the Black people walked away from the Church.

NN: This is similar to comments made about the Old Durham Road Cemetery.

JCW: Exactly. We were nothing but a bunch of Bible thumpers, always wanting something for nothing. And, the most ridiculous statement of all was that no Black people were involved. I

may be very fair-skinned, but I am most certainly a Black woman and a very proud one, at that.²

NN: But this is 2015.

JCW: Exactly. But we cannot become complacent and I've said this for many, many years: racism is the oldest profession. The only thing that's happened is that it's gone underground and when we become complacent it surfaces again. And of course, when I read those nasty remarks, I almost lost my mind. I chain-smoked about five cigarettes and did a lot of skulking around the house. The dog stayed well out of my way until I cooled off. I speak about this sort of thing all the time. Whenever it happens, even today, I think what have I been doing all these years? What have my colleagues been doing? We're all on the same wavelength. We have our different ways of doing things in our approach, but we're all working together to complement each other as sister organizations, helping each other with whatever our dilemma may be. At least, I hope that's the way that it's been. When uninformed people make statements like that, it hurts. It just hurts!

NN: Yes... to have that comment thrown out like that.

JCW: Exactly. And the thing about it is the person didn't even have the guts to give their real name. So they knew they were wrong. If I'm wrong, I'm the first one to admit it. But I am who I am. If you want a piece of this, don't allude to who I am. You say my name. You must have the courage of your convictions. I not only demand of myself that I show respect, I demand it in return.

NN: So, how much money did you raise through the crowdfunding?

JCW: We reached our goal of \$140,000. \$79,261 was raised through the crowdfunding initiative and the balance through private and public donations. Funds are still coming in, along with many in-kind donations. It is now over two hundred thousand dollars.

NN: And where did that money come from? Who donated?

JCW: From every walk of life, from all over Canada, all over the United States. We've surpassed our wildest dreams.

NN: Did people say why they were donating?

JCW: Yes, they did. Some because they remembered the church from when they were kids. Some because they didn't want to lose the landmark, but didn't really know anything about the importance of it. It was simply a landmark. Some that weren't even from the area, just visiting

² Editor's note: Janie has noticed a substantial increase in local interest in Black History and the history of the Oro African Church, since the Public Relations Initiative was launched during Black History Month 2015.

in the area and thought this was a little quaint church. Some because they are descendants that haven't lived in the area for many, many years, and wanted to help.

NN: And some from the States as well?

JCW: Oh yes, several from the United States.

NN: How did they connect to it?

JCW: Through the Morris family. Noah Morris was the original owner of the land.

NN: That's so exciting. And you also applied for a Trillium grant. How much was that?

JCW: Yes, and we were successful on that. \$121,200 was raised through that initiative. The Township entered into a collaborative effort with the Vaughan African-Canadian Association, who acted as Lead Partner on the Trillium Grant Application. \$94,200 of the funding received is being applied directly to the Church restoration work. \$27,000 will be used by VACA to develop and distribute a children's book and an interactive historical school program about the Church. Additional funding, in the amount of \$77,650, was eventually received on the second application to Parks Canada (the church is a National Historic Site). The first application proved unsuccessful because it did not meet with Parks Canada Guidelines. There was a lot of bantering back and forth when the project was first being addressed by the Heritage Committee and the Steering Committee, as to what the best course of action would, or should be. One of the major problems over the years was brought about by out-of-control vehicles hitting the church, and thereby weakening the entire structure. Part of this is due to line-of-sight issues at the corner of Line 3 and the Old Barrie Road, especially since the road has been widened. The Church could not be moved anywhere else on the existing one-acre lot without the possibility of invasion of grave shafts. The Municipality purchased the surrounding land a number of years ago and it was all part of Noah Morris' original farm. The first thought was to dismantle and re-assemble the Church. This would have made it easier to address the problem areas within the structure. They could repair or replace the logs that needed fixing and then the Church could be re-assembled a little bit south on the adjacent property, well-back from the road. This approach would have allowed for further development around the Church, on a five-year plan. Well, we submitted that, but Parks Canada went 'thumbs down', so we had to go back to the drawing board.



NN: So, they'd rather have the building hit by a car? (I'm being facetious!)

JCW: Well, the problem is, being that it's a National Historic Site, it cannot be moved or altered or anything that would take away from the historical integrity of the building. A whole new set of guidelines and rules come into play. Non-compliance would have resulted in loss of the National Historic Site status. Another difficulty came about as a direct result of the road being widened and elevated. With Oro being an area where there's a lot of snow in winter, there's a run-off when the snow melts. The run-off ended up under the Church, causing the sill logs to rot. The old road was just two narrow tracks and because this is now a major corner, the traffic is unbelievable. People are coming and going to and from work in Orillia and Barrie. It's nothing to see two hundred cars go by there in no time. Twenty or thirty years ago, you might see a car once in a blue moon.

NN: Is there a light there or a stop sign?

JCW: There's a stop sign. It's about responsible driving! In 1981 a racist actually put a dump truck right through the front of it. They drove a dump truck right through the center of it. That's why they put those huge stones along the road allowance. I said to Mayor Hughes, "Please God! I hope you are going to get rid of those huge boulders!" There's been so much negotiation with the people that have worked on the Church, doing Band-Aid fixes over the years, but now that it's a National Historic Site the criteria are so strict. Another problem that the Committee needed to address was that there was no point in fixing the roof without repairing the bottom sill logs. And, so there were a lot of things they couldn't possibly know until the covering was taken off. Even when the clapboard was removed, there were things about the logs that no one knew. And when they lifted the floor boards that were installed when the Church was repaired after the dump truck was driven into it, it was discovered that the men who worked on it had written their names on the undersides of the boards, so that little bit of history is there. During the stabilization process, strapping was put in place, and between the logs where some of the chinking had been, workmen found shards of a hand-painted cup dated, c. 1795 – 1820. They found axe heads buried in the dirt floor. There were also debates about the original location of the chimney. There is a picture taken of the Church c.1941. We could see the chimney was in the centre then, and the Church was in a bad state. So clearly everyone in the congregation sat around the old pot-bellied stove to stay warm. Archaeologists found the actual hearth stone that the stove sat on, pieces of charcoal, pieces of the original glass, hundreds of square-headed nails and things like that.



NN: So, it's a heritage site and an archaeological site.

JCW: Oh, absolutely! Each step that was taken they had to have it inspected by archaeologists,

heritage consultants, engineers and the government.

(Janie retrieves and shows Naomi some of the square-headed, handmade nails and some glass shards.)

JCW: What you have in your hands are 170 year old nails, hand forged. If you look at the glass you can see the difference in the old glass. You can actually see prisms in it.

NN: That's amazing. That's very thin for that time.

JCW: It is. And, of course, it would have been very expensive. People ask, "Why were the windows made like that?" The double-hung windows feature 24 panes per window. It's because glass was so expensive. They couldn't get the big sheets transported over rough roads, so they used smaller panes.



NN: When will the work be finished?

JCW: In the spring.

NN: And are they working on it through the winter?

JCW: Yes, they are putting the footings in place for the new foundation. There was a debate about whether they were just going to pour a cement pad and set the church back on it. But it was redundant, because of the runoff from the road. When the snow melted, it was going downhill and underneath the structure and pooling under there. Back in the '40s and '50s, the church itself was sitting on field stone of various sizes. One of the repairs they did - you know that old pebbly cement? That had been poured in, obviously from the outside, around the edge. Once our crew took the floor out, we could see this. It had fallen away, which allowed for water, rodents, everything else to get under the structure. I was one of the ones that said, that's not going to last. So it was back to the drawing board, back to Parks Canada. Now it's elevated three to three and a half feet on cribs. There have been comments about how it wasn't originally at that elevation. And keep in mind, the building codes have changed. So, that's quite a dilemma to try and figure out what can be done and how we can keep the building codes and the permanency, without taking



away from the integrity of the structure. It is frustrating! What the engineers decided to do is to drop a four to four and a half foot foundation and install a sump pump. Also, the sides of the foundation are going to have a skin put on as an extra moisture barrier to protect the sill logs. The elevation of the surrounding landscape soil will be adjusted and level with the bottom of the window sills to essentially form an optical illusion. This was the only option, because originally the Church was built according to the rolling land, and each of the four sides was positioned at a different elevation.



NN: And your hope for its completion?

JCW: Well, we're hoping March 2016.

NN: And when are you hoping to have the opening?

JCW: It will be this summer. There are several dates that they're tossing around. We were supposed to have a meeting last Tuesday, but that had to be cancelled. So we do have to finalize that. Naturally I'm pushing for the Re-opening to be held on the Sunday of Emancipation weekend to coincide with the Emancipation Festival. A lot of descendants live in, or will be coming to Owen Sound that weekend. Come and share! We're all combined. I'm just part of the team, so all the logistics must be explored. Then it will need to go to a vote before the final date can be set.³ They do take into consideration any advice I may have and mull it over. And I always do try to explain what my reasoning is so that it's not just someone thinking Janie just wants to have it her own way. That's not the case. I have to speak as a descendant myself. Although I am on the steering committee, and I have to speak as a descendant, I also need to try to evaluate and understand what other descendants have mentioned to me, and take their

³ Editor's note: It proved to be impossible to hold the Grand Re-Opening on Emancipation Weekend, as the Way Home Concert is also scheduled to be held that weekend. Although yet to be confirmed by Council, the Steering Committee has tentatively decided on the weekend of August 19, 2016. As soon as confirmation has been received by Township Council the date will be announced through the media, posted on the Township website and Facebook.

concerns into consideration. But, as a business person, I understand where the township is at. The one thing I can honestly say is, “No one need fear.” This municipality has been amazing, not only with this stage of the preservation of the church, but the Oro-Medonte community has maintained that church for generations. Just like how the white abolitionists of old assisted our people. It’s communities helping communities. It’s people helping people for one common goal. I won’t deny it, it has been frustrating. It’s been frustrating for all the team. We hoped to have it all done last year. But we would rather do it properly. Some would very easily say, “Well, let’s just do what’s absolutely necessary”, without looking to the long term. “We’re not even going to be here to see it, so why should we do anything more?” However, the committee and I are of the opinion, if we’re trying to leave a legacy for our children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren, and great-greats for the next two hundred years, why would we want to leave them with a big mess?

NN: Or something that they just have to keep patching up.



JCW: Exactly. Well, you know it’s like anything else, you can patch all you want, but it comes to a point where you can’t patch anymore. And it’s got to be done properly and the Township is insistent that it is.⁴ Shawn Binns, Oro-Medonte’s Director of Recreation and Community Services, is the project lead. He is the man who is responsible for coordinating the tradespeople, engineers, etc. He is the liaison with Parks Canada, the Council, the steering committee, and the heritage consultant. He’s a young man, a young father who has gone above and beyond the call of duty. There are just not enough words to express my appreciation for everything that has been done toward preserving the Church. I say it to all the descendants, “We have nothing to fear. The Municipality is doing such a fabulous job.” They could very easily just have said, “It’s

⁴ Janie notes: “We are extremely fortunate that the Township opted to approach the project as they did. In doing so, a number of artefacts were revealed that have provided leads to the hidden history of the Church and its congregation from the earliest period of the Oro Black Settlement.”

an old building, let it go”, especially when Parks Canada initially turned us down, but they didn’t.

NN: That’s fantastic. I’m going to look forward to the opening!

JCW: There’s going to be a wonderful celebration for the Re-opening and it will certainly be a day of Jubilee.

NN: Good. So, Janie, is there anything else you want to tell me?

JCW: Just that I appeal to any descendants who may read this interview, to come forward. Tell us your stories. This is the thing: we’ve saved the church. For those who haven’t been there through the whole process, it was like an old man that was crippled and bent and worn out by life. But even now, when there’s still a lot of work to do, it’s standing there on those cribs, proud as punch.⁵ The day the church was moved I was so overwhelmed, that I went right to my knees. The tears just started to flow. To see that happen after 170 years. Not only to watch it being moved. It was tears of joy, as opposed to the tears of pain and sorrow, if it had gone to the ground. So I’ve been trying to convince descendants in the area to become involved. It stands to reason that descendants that are at a great distance can’t be there at meetings all the time. That’s just impossible. However, I ask them to send a word of acknowledgement that they’re interested. I’ve told them, “We’ve been given the opportunity to become involved – to have a say. You can see what’s going to happen if nothing is done to save this Church. I do not want to hear later, if the Church goes down to the ground.”

NN: Right, because you’ll get those same comments as that person posted.

JCW: Exactly. The thing is, at that particular point when this conversation came up, I said, “All we can do is try. And yes, we’ll be heartbroken if we can’t save it.” Because, when the project began, we didn’t really know what we could do. We didn’t know how bad the deterioration was - the insect infestation and all that. I said, “If we don’t try, then shame on us”. There’s a descendant in Red Deer, Alberta – she can’t be here, she has a very ill husband – she sent \$5,000 and she’s in contact. Even if it’s just a word of encouragement, or a “How’s it going?” There are regular updates on the Oro-Medonte Township website. People can send messages through Facebook. Samah Othman is putting postings on Facebook for anyone that wants to go on. It’s public domain, so anyone that’s interested in regular updates can view them without having to be a member. There are videos and all sorts of things.

NN: Well, Janie, thank you. This has been fantastic.

⁵ The Church was moved back onto the new foundation on December 16, 2015. The project is on schedule with finishing touches to the interior of the Church. Landscaping will be completed, as soon as the frost is out of the ground.