

## To Educate Our Hearts: The 145<sup>th</sup> Emancipation Celebration

By Lisa Wodhams with a review of the Homecoming Parade and Emancipation Picnic by Karin Foster

The heart of a spectator at the Emancipation Celebration in Owen Sound is pulled in many directions. Whether it breaks for the iniquity of slavery, rejoices for the resilience of spirit of the African Canadian people, or quickens with praise as gospel fills the air, the weekend is an emotional experience. The Festival is an opportunity to immerse oneself in an important cultural aspect of Grey County's past, present, and future. Historically speaking, the weekend commemorates the British Commonwealth Emancipation Act and the United States Emancipation Proclamation; it is the longest running event in Grey Bruce area, if not Canada. The weekend is a sensory, spiritual, and soulful experience that brings history to the present tense. Tribute to the heartrending realities of slavery is made, but the focus is unmistakably on the celebration of freedom, of a nation's emancipation in the fullest meaning of the word.

*"And by virtue of the power, and for the purpose aforesaid, I do order and declare that all persons held as slaves within said designated States, and parts of States, are, and henceforward shall be free;"*  
— Abraham Lincoln's  
Emancipation  
Proclamation

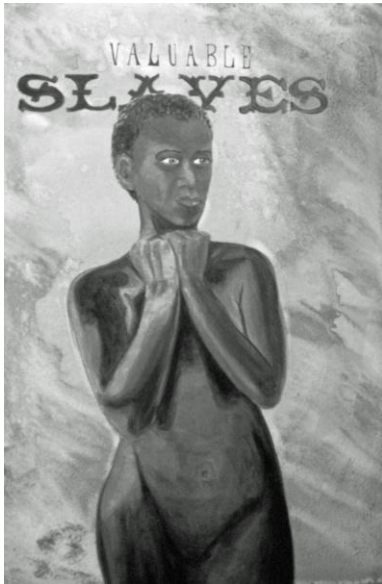
### The Emancipation Art Exhibit

The festivities began in July with the Emancipation Art Exhibit opening at Grey Roots Museum & Archives. Participating artists were Joan Butterfield, Linda Johnson, Bonita Johnson-deMatteis, Anna Maria Dickinson, Valerie Tillman Coon, Shirley Thompson-Kort, Lorraine Thompson, Susan Washington, Tony Miller, and Roxanne Joseph. One of the exhibit's greatest strengths was the scope of its subject matter. It allowed the public



**Grace by Joan Butterfield**

to witness the history of African Canadian culture in more ways than the singular light of slavery. Faith had a strong presence in many of the paintings, including *Grace* by Joan Butterfield, seen here to the left. Other paintings rendered African heritage, like Shirley Thompson-Kort's traditional style *Warrior*. Landscapes like *Dawn by the Riverside – Laundry Day* by Anna Maria Dickinson and *Morning Mist* by Susan Washington spoke their own quiet tributes to a time past. The elements of romance, passion, charm, and humour provided an interesting contrast to those that exposed brutal truths about slavery. *The Auction* by Tony Miller and *I am* by Linda Johnson both depicted cutting truths that tugged at the viewer's conscience. For anyone looking to acquire a special and significant piece of artwork, please



*The Auction by Tony Miller*

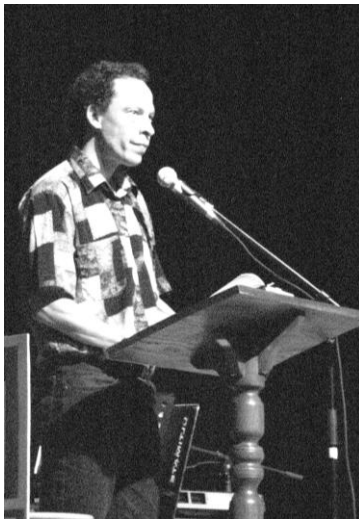
note that items in the exhibit are available for sale from the artists.

The opening was well received, with Doris Fraser, the exhibit's curator, Dennis Scott, Emancipation Celebration Chair, and Warden Bob Pringle there to cut the ribbon. After wine and refreshments, the partakers congregated in the foyer as the blues of the ever-charismatic Bobby "Dean" Blackburn and his sons Brooke, Cori, and Robert, with Steve Kennedy on sax, carried the event into the night.

### **The Speakers' Forum "Community, Roots & Culture – Perspectives"**

From August 3<sup>rd</sup> to 5<sup>th</sup>, generations of people from all over Ontario and beyond filled the venues of the Emancipation Celebration. Sitting in the gymnasium of the Owen Sound Collegiate and Vocational Institute on Friday night, one could take in the spectacle of families, friends, and new acquaintances uniting in an atmosphere

of great fellowship. Pedestrians outside on that hot August evening would have been treated to the sound of the Emancipation Jazz Band carrying out on the breeze. The



**Lawrence Hill**

evening's MC was Barry Penhale, publisher at Natural Heritage Books. In attendance were two eminent speakers, Afua Cooper and Lawrence Hill. Afua Cooper is an award-winning poet, author, historian, curator, performer, cultural worker, recording artist and was recently named by *Essence Magazine* as one of the 25 women who are shaping the world. The audience was utterly captivated as she chanted



**Afua Cooper**

the poetic verses in her *Copper Woman*. In haunting expressions of sorrow, passion, love, pain, and strength, Afua melds human emotions with political concerns and stories from the ancients. Dr. Cooper holds a Ph.D. in history from the University of Toronto, with specialities in slavery, abolition, and women's studies. Her expertise has made Afua a leading voice for uncovering the secrets of Canada's Black past. Dr. Cooper spoke on the inspiration behind her newest historical publication: *The Hanging of Angelique*. Entranced while visiting a gallery exhibiting a passage on slavery in Canada, she came upon the story of Marie-Joseph Angelique. She learned to read French in order to

interpret Angelique’s trial proceedings and brought to life the story of the Portuguese-born Black slave woman hanged in 1734 for allegedly setting fire to Old Montreal. Dr. Cooper noted that although many think of Canada as the refuge for slaves, there were indeed times when a “reverse underground railroad” existed – slaves of Canadians escaping to the United States.



**Eugene Smith**

Lawrence Hill is an acclaimed author, journalist, keynote speaker, volunteer, and speech writer. He has published seven books, including the bestseller, *Black Berry, Sweet Juice: On Being Black and White in Canada*, *Deserter’s Tale*, *Any Known Blood*, and *Some Great Thing*. He has been the senior speech writer for the Ontario Government, as well as a writing teacher at the University of British Columbia, Ryerson Polytechnic University, and John Hopkins University from which he holds a Master of Arts in Writing. He opened his address with a reading from his most recent and acclaimed work: *The Book of Negroes*. The book’s namesake comes from a ledger used by the British,

which is “the first documentation of Black people in North America.”<sup>1</sup> Aminata Diallo, the protagonist, is an African woman, kidnapped in youth and brought in slavery to South Carolina. Lawrence Hill is a master of character development; even in his short reading, Aminata’s character and past evolved in his words. The juxtaposition of humour and deep tragedy is a compelling trait of Lawrence Hill’s work, and guests of the evening flocked to his table after the ceremonies concluded. Both speakers were magnetic in their presentations and were presented with copies of Linda Johnson’s *I am* as a thank you.

Tabitha VandenEnden, the World Vision Regional Campaign Representative for Southwestern Ontario, was present to speak on the current global situation of human suffering. One image of great impact was that of a woman making disks made out of dirt, water, butter and salt. They were called clay cakes – and they are what people eat in Haiti if they cannot afford rice. The Emancipation Celebration is working in partnership



**Emancipation Project Director, Cliff Heiple presents Lawrence Hill and Afua Cooper with copies of *I Am* by Linda Johnson**



**Bobby “Dean” Blackburn on keys with Roselyn Brown on flute.**

<sup>1</sup> *Book of Exodus*. Giese, Rachel. Feb 15, 2007. [http://www.cbc.ca/arts/books/book\\_of\\_negroes.html](http://www.cbc.ca/arts/books/book_of_negroes.html)



**Discovering loved ones on the Family Wall**



**Book signings and sales in the Marketplace Area**



**Joaquin Nunez Hidalgo Afro/Cuban Dance Troupe**

with the program, “Pennies from Heaven” to help assuage poverty here in our own community, as well as in communities abroad.

The night was rounded out by more music from the Emancipation Jazz Band. Members were Bobby “Dean” Blackburn on vocals and keys, Ron Harrison on drums, Steve Kennedy on sax, Howard Aye on bass, and RoseLyn Brown on sax and flute. Special guest vocalists were Ann Wills and Eugene Smith.

### **Owen Sound Homecoming Parade and Emancipation Picnic**

The Emancipation Celebration contributed a 145<sup>th</sup> Anniversary float to Owen Sound’s sesquicentennial Homecoming Parade on the morning of Saturday August 4<sup>th</sup>. A crowd was present to enjoy the Joaquin Nunez Hidalgo Afro/Cuban Band, as well as to greet Adventure Tour cyclists who had made their way from Buffalo, New York starting on Tuesday that same week. This pilgrimage by the cyclists was to honour all who escaped slavery via the Underground Railroad.

Following the parade, the event which started it all, the picnic, got underway at Owen Sound’s beautiful and historic Harrison Park. The day was filled with live music, games, races, special awards, crafts, and food vendors. A cairn presentation was made and stories were shared by Karolyn Smardz Frost, Bonita Johnson-deMatteis, Lawrence Hill and Afua Cooper, who are all accomplished authors. Bonita Johnson-deMatteis launched her newest book, *Going North: The Story of Geraldine’s Great Great Grandfather*. Ginger Press presented book signings by Lawrence Hill, Afua Cooper, and Bonita Johnson-deMatteis. Just after 7pm the music started again and a large gathering crowded in around





**Dennis Scott, Emancipation Celebration Chair, addresses the crowd**



**Lisa and Dennis Scott with the UGRR Cyclists**

the stage area for the Emancipation Concert in the Park. Wave 94.7 radio was present to broadcast as “Blackburn,” a renowned band in the Toronto area, started things off. Robert, Brooke, Duane, and Cory Blackburn, as well as their close friend Howard Ayea entertained with their spiritual,

soulful jazz and R&B. They were joined, once again, by their father Bobby “Dean” who by now has become a favourite and much anticipated personality for those who did not already know him. Bobby “Dean” has travelled the BME, AME, and Baptist churches as part of a sextet, as well as CBC’s “Black Hallelujah” and has been a headliner at Handicapped Children’s Camps, the Canadian Blues Festival, and the Beaches Blues Festival with his sons. On trumpet was Van Dixon, Steve Kennedy once again played the sax, and the voices of Heather Cadogan, Dion Skinner, and Dawn Gibbes provided the background accompaniment.

Liberty Silver brought down the house with her energizing rendition of “Crazy” by Gnarls Barkley. She and Demo Cates, who followed with his easy jazz, were backed by the keyboard of Lance Anderson. The night rolled on with a tribute to James “Mr. Blues” Wayner. The Tombstones reunited in acknowledgement of Mr. Wayner, their former singer and Vice Chair of the Emancipation Festival Board and former webmaster of the Emancipation.ca. Stan Endersby, Rod Ramsey, Sonny Lewis, accompanied former Tombstones Neil Glen, Dave Fearnall, Dennis Scott, George Dahmer, Ted Graper, and Arnie Clark in the presentation. This was followed by a contribution from James’s last group, the Bearcats. The swinging evening was brought to a close by Blackburn and people departed happily with feet that were sore from dancing.

### **Gospel Explosion at the Owen Sound BME Church**

The Sunday morning Gospel Explosion was anticipated to be a spectacle of musical talent and praise – and it



**Norma Blacke-Bourdeau**



**TC3 – Afro Caribbean Dance**



**TC3 – Afro Caribbean Drumming**

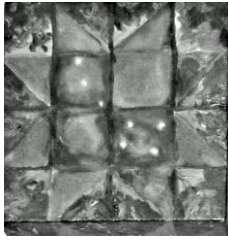
surpassed those expectations with great flare. Bobby Blackburn opened the services with “Swing Low Sweet Chariot.” Norma Blacke Bourdeau’s gospels echoed a haunting story of faith on the Underground

Railroad. She melded storytelling and the history of the gospels with three traditional gospel hymns to create an educational and stirring presentation. TC3, the Toronto Children’s Concert

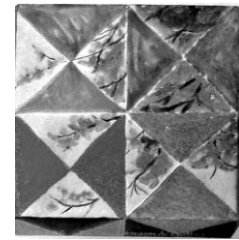
Choir, had the congregation at their feet, mesmerized by the Afro-Caribbean dance and drumming. These children have travelled globally and the atmosphere of the BME turned electric with their energy. Following TC3 was Alvina August, a former member of the University of Toronto Gospel Choir, who had the congregation participating in hymns in her native Zimbabwean dialect. The gospel trio of the BME Choral Group revived tradition as they sang a selection of classic hymns. The Choral Group, made up of Doris Green, Gwen (Green) McQuilkin, and Geraldine “Courtney” Houey, would later close the ceremonies with an uplifting postlude. Ray Robertson was next, an award winning vocalist from Toronto. This was not, however, before Canadian Idol runner-up Gary Beals exalted his own heartfelt praise. It is obvious that this young man has a great deal of faith and a strong belief in what he is doing behind every note. Words cannot describe the experience of the Gospel Explosion at the BME Church. The atmosphere, with hands raised and praises to God reverberating off of the walls, is a powerful experience to both the believer and those who want to come simply to hear and see a tremendous display of musical talent. The event was broadcast for the listeners of CFRB radio. Sincere congratulations and applause to Heather Cadogen, the Emancipation Gospel Director who was responsible for the Sunday Gospel.



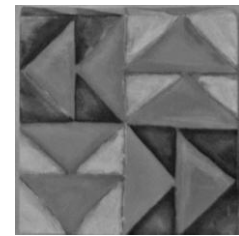
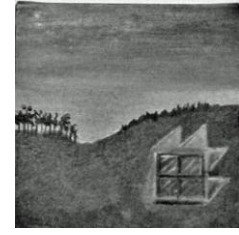
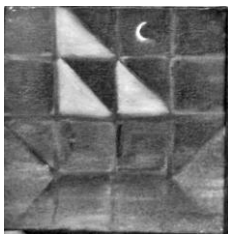
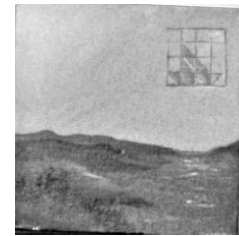
**Alvina August, formerly of the University of Toronto Gospel Choir**



In the words of Barry Penhale, the MC at the Emancipation Speakers' Forum, the early Black settlers of Owen Sound and Grey County "brought their courage, brought their skills, [and] brought their faith." The Emancipation Celebration is an



opportunity for families and friends to reunite and take part in a very lively tribute to those early African Canadians and freedom seekers. For others, the weekend is an invaluable opportunity to become acquainted with an important element of Grey County's past. This was my first experience with the Emancipation Celebration and I was blown away. I have benefited greatly from all that I saw and heard, and will most certainly be back next year, with friends and family in tow. For me, Dennis Scott was absolutely correct when he opened the weekend on Friday night by saying that it would "enlighten your souls, lift your spirits, [and] educate your hearts." A mighty thank you is in order to Dennis and Lisa Scott, and all of the organizers, contributors, and volunteers who were responsible for making the weekend what it was.



<sup>1</sup> Artistry on this page is from Bonita Johnson-deMatteis' "Quilt Series".