

CFHA ~ An Evening with the Canadian Friends Historical Association

September 20, 2008
Grey Roots Museum & Archives

Naomi Norquay

Every year, the Canadian Friends (aka Quakers) Historical Association holds a conference in conjunction with its annual general meeting. This fall's event was the third conference in which they have focused on the Friends' / Quakers' role in bringing about the abolition of slavery. (See the article by Christopher Densmore, who spoke to the Canadian Friends Historical Association at the Yonge Street Meetinghouse at Newmarket in April, 2008.) The conference took place at Grey Roots Museum & Archives because the Friends wished to reacquaint themselves with their historic roots in Grey County. There were a few Quaker communities in Grey in the 19th century at Heathcote, the Mallory Tract and Woodford. Although there are still Quakers living in the area, there are no meetinghouses in operation today.

After the annual general meeting, Petal Furness took the group on a tour of the museum and archives. After lunch, Terri Jackson was the tour guide for a bus tour of Black Heritage sites in and around Owen Sound. And finally, after a sumptuous dinner, the 40 or so attendees gathered in the auditorium for a viewing of the film *Speakers for the Dead*. The film makers, Jennifer Holness and David Sutherland were introduced and warmly welcomed.

Speakers for the Dead, a National Film Board production, was released in 2000 to much acclaim and public interest. It traces the story of the Black pioneer cemetery which is located on the Old Durham Road near Priceville, Ontario. Through interviews and dramatization, the film explores the events that led to the demise of the cemetery (it became a farmer's potato field) and its eventual resurrection as an important historic site. This was the work of a group of local citizens, who formed a committee along with descendants of the Black pioneers, professional historians and an archaeologist. They convinced the land owner to give the land to the municipality. It is now a designated historic site.

The film does not stop there. It wades into what is still an ongoing debate about whether or not the Old Durham Road Black Pioneer Cemetery Committee should be allowed to undertake an archaeological dig in the cemetery in order to recover more headstones. (The current site has four headstones under plexiglass. They were found in the stone pile of the old school house across the road.) The group believes that by recovering headstones, they will not only right some

old wrongs, they will also be able to learn more about the original Black settlers through the names, dates and other information on the stones.

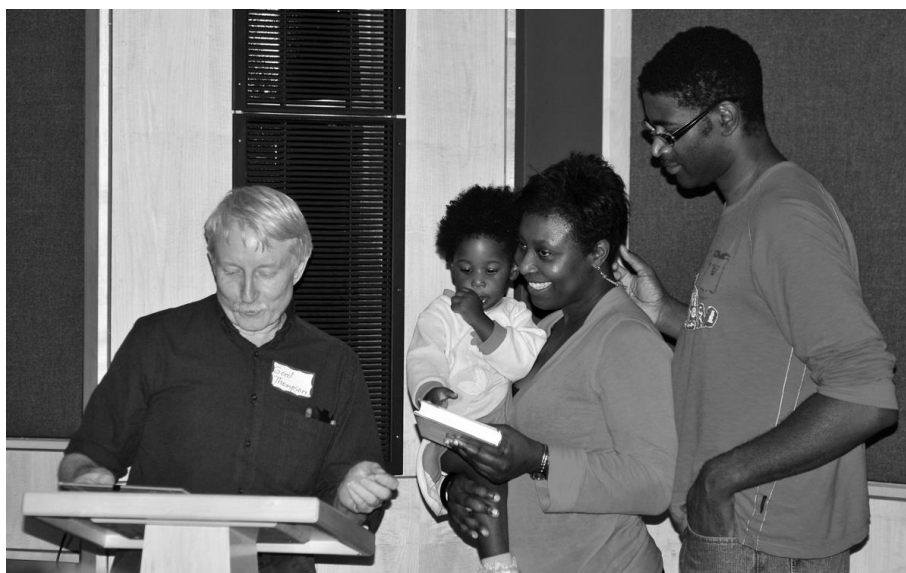
Following the viewing of the film, the audience heard from a most interesting panel: it included Jennifer Holness (film maker), as well as Karolyn Smardz Frost and Les MacKinnon (who both figured prominently in the film). Les MacKinnon gave the keynote address. For those of you who know Les, you know that he is an incurable storyteller - especially when it comes to telling the stories of Priceville's Black pioneer settlers and the myriad small and large acts of cunning and spite that led to their disappearance from the historical landscape. A "fiery fourth-generation Scottish Canadian" (his self-description in the film), Les spoke knowledgeably and passionately about a series of events that quite literally "buried" the cemetery, ensuring that no head stones would ever be turned up by an archaeologist's careful digging.



Les MacKinnon and Jennifer Holness

Drawing on his own seemingly infinite knowledge of the area's oral history and on his many connections in the community, Les pieced together some amazing information about the history of road building in the area - and, of course - spun it into an entertaining and thoughtful tale. It seems that in the 1940s when snow plows were introduced, roads had to be built up in order to create ditches for holding and draining the plowed snow. Les quizzed his father about this and learned that the municipality was getting gravel for the roads from an area behind the cemetery (which was at this point a farmer's field). The gravel company had the farmer's permission to drive through his field. In order to ensure that the trucks did not sink into the earth of that field (which was likely more vulnerable to caving in because it contained graves), the gravel company put a huge layer of gravel over the field. When they were finished removing all the gravel, they added a layer of top soil so the farmer could continue planting potatoes. Les's love for his community and his ability to render its history into fascinating tales provided a sense of hope and inspiration.

Jennifer Holness then spoke about the "power of the point of view that is always presented" and how hard it is to break its hold on "truth". She expressed the need to probe the contexts in which such "truths" hold so much power - and to question the "truisms" that come to us through history. *Speakers for the Dead* tries to do just that. Having heard her speak, I can now understand why the film's story didn't end with the ceremony in which the plaque was unveiled by then Lieutenant Governor Lincoln Alexander. That would have been a "happy ending"! The story of the cemetery is not over. Jennifer, like Les, understands the need for constant vigilance, lest the inconvenient truths become buried once again.



Jennifer Holness and David Sutherland receiving recognition.

The third speaker was Karolyn Smardz Frost, archaeologist, historian, and author of *I've Got a Home in Glory Land* (Toronto: Thomas Allen Publishers, 2007), for which she was the winner of the 2007 Governor General Award for Non-Fiction. Karolyn spoke about her role as an archaeologist and the important work she and other archaeologists have done in support of Black history in the province. Besides her work with the Old Durham Road Black Pioneer Cemetery, Karolyn also worked on the site of the Blackburns' home and business in Toronto. The Blackburns owned and operated Toronto's first taxicab business. They were fugitives from slavery in Kentucky and they are the subject of Karolyn's book. She also spoke about doing some archaeological work for the First Baptist church in Buxton, Ontario¹ that wished to build an addition, but did not want to disturb any unmarked graves. These stories nicely illustrated her involvement with important Black history sites in Ontario. Karolyn also read from her book and then told the story about how she came to write the book. Her enthusiasm and love for the Blackburns and their story was infectious.



Audience at the CFHA evening event

¹ For more information on this historic Black church and community, visit: <http://www.buxtonmuseum.com/history/hist-baptist-church.html>

While Karolyn was the only trained archaeologist on the panel, it was evident to me that we were blessed with the knowledge, insights and expertise of three “diggers”, committed to being speakers for the dead and educators for the living. It was a highly entertaining and thought-provoking evening. Gord Thompson closed the event by thanking the panellists and wondering about the “Quaker Pricevilles” that may be out there” and telling us how delighted he was to find common ground between the work being done in Grey County and that of the Canadian Friends Historical Association.