



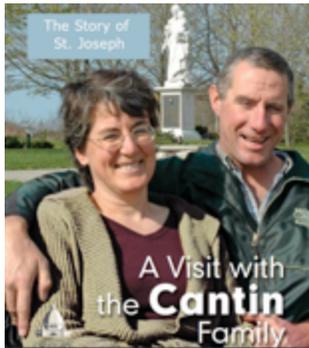
# Huron County Historical Society

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 519-440-6206 email: [hchs1965@gmail.com](mailto:hchs1965@gmail.com)  
[www.HuronCountyHistoricalSociety.ca](http://www.HuronCountyHistoricalSociety.ca)

## Executive for 2020-2021

Vacant	President	519-440-6206	Ralph Laviolette	Secretary-treasurer
Vicky Culbert	Past- president	226-421-2295	Mac Campbell	Director
Elaine Snell	Membership	519-523-9531	James White	Director
Mary Gregg	Director		Susan Glousher	Director
Rhea Hamilton- Seeger	Director	519-612-1201	Larry Mohring	Director
			Liz Sangster	Director

### Zoom Event April 8



**Please join Marc and Pauline Cantin as they share the story of St. Joseph - "the city that never was". Marc and Pauline are members of the St. Joseph and Area Historical Society and Marc is the great grandson of Narcisse Cantin - "the Wizard of St. Joseph".**

They invite you into their home as they share the story and many artifacts from their personal archives. Marc spent summers at the cottage in St. Joseph where his Uncle Napoleon worked diligently to preserve the history of the area. Nap created "Les Archives", the original collection, in a little white building behind his house and as he aged, he looked for someone to "keep the history".

This is how the St. Joseph and Area Historical Society began in the winter of 1996. A small group of area residents came together to work on a plan for the archives. In 1999 the archives were moved to a building at Hessenland where they are at present.

We hope you enjoy the story and we want to thank Joe Wooden, also a member of the Historical Society for the title we are using as it is the title of the book he wrote documenting the history of the area.

Please email [hchs1965@gmail.com](mailto:hchs1965@gmail.com) to register and receive meeting links

### March 2021 Newsletter

So much to share with you this month  
 As you can see we have several zoom events: first with Marc and Pauline Cantin and on April 9 we will meet Jason Wilson, (virtually), author of "Soldiers of Song. And we also have plans for a film society.

### HCHS FILM SOCIETY proposal:

Over the past few meetings, the Society's Directors have considered forming a Film Society section and would like your input as members. The proposal involves a film evening to be held once a month, by Zoom conferencing until COVID permits live meetings, then at the Goderich Museum.

The focus would be on Canadian films from the National Film Board archives, particularly those that have won awards or have strong local interest..

The Inaugural meeting would emulate a Focus Group on Thursday evening April 22 7 pm, and would look like this:

First Half – a documentary focused on South West Ontario and some select short films by Norman McLaren.

Short intermission.

Second Half – a discussion of the concept, forming a group to organize, searching for films of interest, discussion of other possible timing, frequency and venues, and so on.

The programme for the first half of the April 22 meeting would include two Norman McLaren films - 'Neighbours' and 'A Chairy Tale;' plus a NFB short - 'Speakers for the Dead' - about a black cemetery excavated near Priceville Ontario together with interviews with long-dispersed relatives of the deceased. A trailer for the possible future feature film - Anne Wheeler's Bye, Bye Blues - might also be shown.

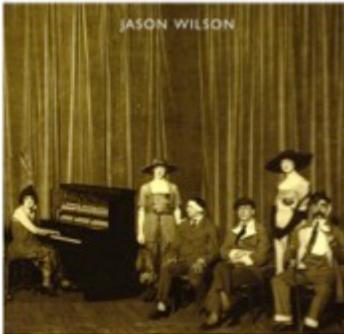
Members of HCHS will have the option of joining the Film Society for future showings for a slight fee to cover the costs of rental of an auditorium and rental, shipping and handling of the movie(s).

Please contact James White at 519- 821-5096 if you want further information. Attendance will be by invitation using email addresses.

If you wish to join this first, free evening Zoom presentation on April 22, please email your request for the Zoom link to [hchs1965@gmail.com](mailto:hchs1965@gmail.com).

## SOLDIERS OF SONG

The Dumbells and Other Canadian Concert Parties of the First World War



Zoom Event April 9

### Soldiers of Song *The Dumbells and Other Canadian Concert Parties of the First World War*

by Jason Wilson

The author will be in  
Goderich (virtually) on  
April 9<sup>th</sup> at 7 pm to speak  
on "Soldiers of Song."

His talk is sponsored by the Huron County Historical Society. (See below for details on how to view this on Zoom.)

#### Feeding the hand that bites them or biting the hand that feeds them?

Canada's top military brass recognized early on in the 1914-1918 conflict that morale amongst front line soldiers was diminishing. Something was needed to ginger up the enthusiasm of troops fighting the Germans under devastating conditions of mud, blood and stench in the trenches. Concert parties were the vehicles chosen by the Canadian Expeditionary Force as an antidote. Informal entertainment was already happening at the level of squads telling each other stories and singing songs; at first these were supplemented by professional entertainers giving concerts and recitals. However troop disbursement and sheer numbers made this prohibitively expensive so, in 1916, the CEF encouraged the formation of 'concert parties' from within the ranks. A number of CO's advocated for the move and the "Princess Pat's" and various other regiments formed Comedy Companies. As the author puts it, these CP's helped soldiers by "disabling the nightmare of the war through song and humour."

Jason Wilson has written a comprehensive account of these 'soldiers of song'; their origins and their place in the history of music and theatre in Canada. Although he focuses on the two major Companies – the Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry CC and their amalgamation at war's end with the Dumbells, he refers to the large number of lesser Companies, both in the Canadian and in the British regiments. The author numbers the Canadian ones as between 30 and 40! He points out that many of the homes from which the soldiers were drawn would have had a piano in the living room or parlour so many of them would have been able to sing with their comrades. Informal groups became common. Stories mocking the regime and the high-ups were swapped in off-duty times, which helped alleviate stress. The administration recognized that troops needed entertainment so professionals were engaged to provide concerts and shows. However, as the numbers of soldiers and the extent to which they were dispersed increased, the cost proved prohibitive. Existing soldier entertainers were

recruited as 'soldiers of song' to form Concert Parties who would put on vaudeville-type shows, at first for their own units, then Battalion or Command wide. The author tells us that Jack McLaren was tagged for this job by his Princess Pat's CO, who knew of his theatrical background.

Wilson tracks the development of theatre in Ontario back to the British Garrison stationed here between 1812 and 1871. I was surprised to learn that the British soldiers formed companies to perform a variety of shows for the troops: farces, dramas and even Shakespeare and musicals. He tells us that, when a contingent arrived in a town one of their first projects was construction of a theatre, where one of the soldier's shows was produced. Then the military would foster local amateur groups to use the facilities, eventually leading to productions by touring professionals. By WW1, the author tells us, many Canadian soldiers were practiced singers and familiar with theatre.

The author points to an important difference between the Concert Parties set up by Canadians and the British: the latter were led and directed by officers whereas no distinctions were drawn for Canadians. So the content and style differed; black humor about the war and its administrators were mocked in Canadian shows. As Jason says: "WW1 was a conflict where tragedy was continually draped in the ludicrous" For those who initiated the concert parties the aims were to 'recharge the soldier's will to fight' whereas the parties themselves stressed helping soldiers just to survive the war. Popular songs from music hall entertainment were cunningly rewritten to reflect soldiers' gripes such as the Ross rifle, the rum ration and incompetent leadership. Some officers joined in the satire by choosing to play themselves in the shows. Another favourite target were the civilian "helpers" who were often mocked as upper class ladies, who organized concerts designed to bring high culture to the masses.

Even more popular were the "ladies," we are told. Each party featured actors with female costumes and make up gleaned from scraps and discarded items. So convincing were these 'transvestites' that they were forced to escape surreptitiously from dressing rooms after shows or risk being asked on dates with offerings of flowers.

Although Wilson focuses on two Canadian Concert Parties – the Dumbells and the Princess Pat's – he says there were between 30 and 40 in all. The Dumbells took their name from the insignia on the uniforms of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Division; a dumbbell which, we are told, signified Strength and Silence. The main movers behind each of the major parties were Merton Plunkett and Jack McLaren. Both were natural organizers and brilliant cast members, writing scripts and performing onstage. Plunkett had been instructed in the summer of 1917 by General Sir Arthur Currie to establish a school in Mons for training Concert Parties. In all, 500 individual soldiers and 28 Battalion parties had graduated by war's end. Plunkett formed the 'super Dumbells' that year by cherry-picking individuals from the school and from other parties.

Jason Wilson describes the momentous events during

1918. Jack McLaren and the Princess Pats were summoned to London to perform for King George V and Queen Mary at the Apollo Theatre. At the conclusion of the royal 'chat' following the performance the King picked up on a desperate command overheard when the curtain jammed at the end of the show: "Come on Doc, let's drop the bloody curtain and go," addressing Mary.

In November, shortly before the peace, both groups were billeted in Mons. Plunkett, we are told, wanted to amalgamate the two groups to stage HMS Pinafore. Some Princess Pat's resisted but the combined group of 30 gave their first performance to great acclaim in Mons on November 12th before moving to Brussels for a number of shows including a Royal Command performance for the Belgian King and Queen. They then fulfilled General Currie's mandate to boost the flagging morale of the soldiers awaiting repatriation and entertained them on the voyage home.

Back in Canada the Dumbells continued to entertain on tours and runs across both Canada and the US for another twelve years. The 'talkies,' the demise of vaudeville and their audiences' fading memories spelled their end. Historian Edward Moogk summed up: "They were not only entertainers but also sacreligious, socially aware, sentimental, irreverent and intensely Canadian." Wilson concludes that their brand of black humour provided a revolutionary impulse for such later groups as the Goon Show, Saturday Night Live and Monty Python.

The liveliness of Jason Wilson's writing captures the liveliness of the Dumbells' performances. He covers the broad canvas of theatre in Canada with detailed portraits of the groundbreaking 'soldiers of song,' demonstrating what unassuming change agents they were.

## History Hero

### Sara McCloy Simpson

Sara McCloy was born on her family's farm on Lot 6, Concession Number 10 in Tuckersmith Township. Her father had purchased the farm from his father-in-law John Templeton, who still lived on the farm with the family at the time of Sara's birth. Mr. Templeton and his wife Agnes had established the farm when they came to Canada in the mid 1850's.

While attending school at S.S.#10 Tuckersmith, Sara became known to her classmates as Sadie and this is the name most people came to know her by for the remainder of her life. She attended Seaforth Collegiate Institute before travelling to Toronto to attend the Faculty of Education and attaining her dream of becoming a teacher. She returned to teach in her home section for one year before going back to Toronto to teach for the Methodist Union. During this time she met and married Robert Simpson. Sadie continued to live and teach in Toronto until her Mother's illness brought her back to the farm in Tuckersmith.

Sadie and Robert's daughter Janeth was born on the farm, "The Maples" and soon Sadie was immersed in many activities in the community.

She was a founding member of the Kippen Women's Institute and was one of four ladies who worked to compile a successful cookbook "A Kitchen Bouquet" which was offered for sale to raise funds for the war effort. One of her other projects at this time was to pack boxes to send to soldiers overseas.

In 1942, the Simpson family moved to Hensall where Sadie opened a private kindergarten. The war years also meant a shortage of teachers so Sadie was called



on to return to teaching. The family's move to Hensall gave Sadie the opportunity to be a founding member of the Hensall Women's Institute and she remained an active member for many years. Being a member of the Women's Institute meant Sadie was involved in collecting information for the Tweedsmuir history book for her area. In 1959, Sadie retired from teaching but that didn't mean she was slowing down, she now had time to devote more efforts to explore her own personal genealogy as well as assisting others with research for their own family history projects. She was a talented artist and musician playing piano, violin and mandolin and her skill in researching, writing and editing meant her time was in great demand. She continued to tutor students from elementary to university age until her final illness. She even managed to work in some personal genealogical research during a trip she and her husband took to the United Kingdom.

With Sadie's interest in genealogy, recording history for preservation and her membership in the Women's Institute, it was inevitable that she be involved when there were plans to create a Huron County Historical Society.

Sadie attended the first meeting in May 1964 when the Society was organized and so became a Charter Member of the Huron County Historical Society. She continued to be an active member and member of the Society's council until her passing in 1980.

Sadie enjoyed the countless hours she spent working on the archives with other members of the Society. She also assisted others with research and editing of their historical endeavours. She worked with Miss Belle Campbell to assist her in compiling material for Miss Campbell's book

on the history of Tuckersmith Township, a subject close to her heart as her family were pioneers of the township.

Sadie convened well-attended Historical Society meetings in both Zurich and Hensall. In June of 1977 Ethel Poth and Sadie were delegates to the Ontario Historical Society Annual meeting held at York University in Toronto. In 1979, Sadie was once again Huron's delegate to the Ontario Historical Society's Annual meeting in Orilla.

Given the many hours Sadie spent working to establish and preserve the Archives how fitting that they were transferred to the Huron County Library Building which was officially opened on July 3, 1980. It would have been her 82<sup>nd</sup> birthday, how she would have loved to be there to celebrate!

Sadie was always generous with her time and her talents in helping others prepare presentations and research for their own projects. In December 1979, she suffered a stroke and was hospitalized until she passed away in February 1980. Her passion for history and recording the History of Huron County was passed on to her daughter Janeth and her granddaughters as witnessed by their continued involvement in the Huron County Historical Society.

### Membership renewal....

If you received this newsletter by mail, the date shown above your name on the address label is the year to which your membership is paid up, according to our records. Call Elaine Snell if you are not sure or need clarification. If you are in arrears, consider this a reminder that the membership fees are \$20. To reserve your member's hard copy of Historical Notes, keep your dues up to date. Copies of recent past Historical Notes are available from Elaine Snell at 519-523-9531 (past copies \$8.00 per copy).

*To access the members-only section for the Historical Notes or to do a search for names or places in the Historical Notes, go to*

*[www.HuronCountyHistoricalSociety.ca](http://www.HuronCountyHistoricalSociety.ca), open the dropdown menu for Publications, click HCHS Members Login. If you cannot get access using the password, then check if your web browser is up to date.*

*If the password is lost or not available readily, contact [hchs1965@gmail.com](mailto:hchs1965@gmail.com) or call 519-440-620*

### **Where to get your local History Books**

**And back copies of The Historical Notes – Finchers and The Book Peddler both of Goderich, North Huron Citizen in Blyth, The Book Barn off Hwy 86 between Wingham and Whitechurch, The Village Bookshop, Bayfield and Bayfield Archives.**