



Historic Gloucester

Newsletter of the

**GLOUCESTER
HISTORICAL
SOCIETY**

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Homer Simpson Sets his Christmas Tree on Fire

Christmas Tree Bonfires were once an Ottawa tradition. See Story on Page 5



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President's Report

By Glenn Clark

Will we get a White Christmas this year? With snow slowly accumulating over the last few days and below freezing temperatures in the forecast, it appears that we will have a more traditional holiday season. Is this a good sign for our skiers and skaters? After a couple of bad seasons, this will hopefully be good for ski operators, the Rideau Canal and winter tourism.

In this edition of Historic Gloucester, we offer a Christmas oriented story on 'The Burning of the Greens', an Ottawa tradition dating to the 1950s with a Gloucester connection. The final installment of biographies on World War I soldiers, whose names appeared on a Billings Bridge Orange Lodge scroll has been deferred until the spring newsletter.

We are now considering a variety of sto-

ries for Historic Gloucester in 2025. We have been asked to write a story about the Gloucester Rangers Junior A hockey team. We have recently donated to the City of Ottawa Archives, a Gloucester Rangers leather jacket that had belonged to George Nicholson, manager and coach of the team during the 1970s. Thank you, George Barrett who donated the jacket to the GHS.

Ottawa Hunt and Golf Club Fall Tour

On October 27, 2024, we were pleased to be invited to Ottawa Hunt and Golf Club. About 20 members were treated to a presentation by club historian Bruce McDonald on the history of the club including a short video on President Eisenhower's visit. Yes, he did play a round. We were then taken on a tour of the clubhouse with its many historic photos and then the grounds and its many plaques. Bruce was assisted by Steve Mason and Dave Hutchinson, and we were thankful



GHS Visitors at the Ottawa Golf and Hunt Club on October 27, 2024

for their time and willingness to answer our many questions. One lucky participant received a door prize of a book on the history of the club.

We learned many things during our tour. Did you know that the seating facing the Curling rinks came from the Capitol Theatre? Did you know that when Ottawa's water supply was contaminated in 1911 and 1912, pure spring water was pumped from the Hunt Club providing Ottawa residents with safe drinking water. This was known as Tally Ho Water, which was bottled in a plant just across Hunt Club Road. Two pumps remain on the golf course.

Good News – New Ottawa Hunt and Golf Club Manuscript Posted

We have now posted a new book titled 'A Forgotten Founder: John Moffatt Ross and the Origins of Golf at the Ottawa Hunt and Golf Club' by Donald J. Childs. This explains the detailed planning and construction of the golf course in the 1920s. Please go to our website to open the book. We thank the author for granting us permission to post this book.

Grace Johnston History Room

It is with great regret that I must inform you that the history room has been permanently closed by the City of Ottawa effective October 25, 2024. The Gloucester Historical Society files were removed between November 21st and November 28th. They are being transferred to the City of Ottawa Archives. We are not sure when our files will again become available for reference. This will likely become clearer in the New Year.

Since our April AGM, a committee was

formed to find an alternative location for our office. This did not produce concrete results, and we simply ran out of time.

We also met with Ottawa museums staff concerning the Gloucester artifact collection on November 29th. The collection will also be removed from 4550 Bank Street gradually over the next two years. The collection is currently being itemized and evaluated. It is possible that duplicate items may be removed from the collection, but Gloucester specific artifacts are more likely to be retained. The destination of the collection is still unknown. We have been assured that items from the Gloucester collection will be so designated and it will be possible to tour the collection by appointment in the future once the move is complete.

Many questions remain and there are many items that don't fit with either the archives or museum collection but still tell unique Gloucester stories. What will happen to them? This is something the GHS will have to consider over the coming months. Most importantly, I want to assure you that the Gloucester Historical Society remains open for business. We continue to respond to e-mails and telephone messages. Our books also remain available for sale.

It is also our intention to continue to hold meetings and events in Gloucester locations. We have already made arrangements with our neighbour, St. James Anglican Church Leitrim to hold board meetings in their hall starting this month. Our postal address remains 4550B Bank Street until further notice, however, we are considering renting a post office box in the coming months. You will be notified when a change of address is finalized.



Grace Johnston History Room being dismantled in November 2024.

Farewell!

We will also participate in public events whenever possible. The one exception is Doors Open, now that the Grace Johnston History Room is closed.

2025 Annual General Meeting

We are pleased to announce that Steve McKenna has agreed to speak at our upcoming AGM. He will speak on the village of Gateville, and more generally Billings Bridge. I think we will learn a lot about the long-forgotten village which was centred on St. Thomas Aquinas Roman Catholic Church and the associated separate school, both since closed. The proposed date is Sunday, April 13, 2025, at 2 p.m. The location has still to be finalized.

Revamped By-Laws

We expect to present a fully revised set of By-Laws to meet the requirements of current provincial legislation in advance of 2025 AGM. This will be voted on by the membership at the AGM. Please watch for more information in the next couple of months.

Help Us Celebrate Gloucester's 175th Anniversary in 2025

In 1849, the Baldwin Act was passed by the Canada West (Ontario) government to establish municipal governance. The Act is named for Robert Baldwin who co-led Canada's first responsible government from 1848 to 1851. The act established local government based on a two-tier system, with counties on top and local councils elected by residents. It also identified the requirements for village, town, city and township incorporation.

As a result, Gloucester Township was incorporated in 1850 with the first council elected. Our first Reeve (the township equivalent of a mayor) was James Sieveright. Sieveright Road south of Hunt Club Road is named to honour him.

In celebration of the 175th anniversary of Gloucester's incorporation, the Gloucester Historical Society is planning an event to take place during the summer of 2025. We expect this to take place at the Billings Estate National Historic Site, which for decades was the epicentre of Gloucester life. Please stay tuned for the details and I hope you can join us.

Best Wishes

At this special time of the year, the Board of the Gloucester Historical Society extends our best wishes to you and your family for a wonderful holiday season and a healthy, and prosperous 2025. The society is always thankful for your continuing support.



Christmas Greetings from the Gloucester Historical Society

From left to right – Laurel Sherrer (Secretary-Treasurer) and husband Jack (behind), Lindsay Whilans (Membership Secretary) and husband Bob (behind), Glenn Clark (President) and Alek Golijanin (Director)



Should We Restart an Old Christmas Tradition?

By Glenn Clark

In a November 13, 2024 Ottawa Citizen column written by Bruce Deachman titled *"Nightlife Council Didn't Pick Me – But I'm Still 'Joining' Anyway"*, he wrote *"Let's consider bringing back the annual Burning of the Greens, our late-1950's practice of burning discarded Christmas trees in a huge bonfire for the ages"*.

What is the history behind this practice and why was it discontinued?

The good news is that this story also has a Gloucester connection.

Christmas trees have long been used in our Christmas traditions. My mother spoke of candle lit trees at her rural Renfrew County church back in the 1920s. The tree was even on a turnstile with the requisite pails of water in the case of an accident. It may have been beautiful, but my mother as a child was terrified.

Electric Christmas lights became popular after World War I, thankfully replacing candles and greatly reducing the fire risk. But what became of

the trees at the end of the season?

This was a problem especially in urban areas. Would they be thrown in the back yard to gradually decay or possibly set on fire by neighbourhood children and youth? Indeed, in January 1936, malicious youngsters picked up many discarded trees and barricaded Strathcona Avenue, blocking traffic³⁷. A similar incident in January 1948, resulted in a car accident on King Edward Avenue¹⁰.

There was also a tradition in some families to have a bonfire to burn the trees that had previously adorned their homes. As part of the winter carnivals of 1930 and 1931, rigs were sent out across the city to pick up the trees and brought to Cartier Square, where trees were arranged decoratively, and the carnival finale featured a bonfire of up to 5,000 trees^{32 33 34 35 36}.

Another problem existed with tree lots which left their unsold trees behind. Eventually this was controlled with a refundable fee, if the lot was cleaned up at the end of the season. To attest to the problem of discarded trees, in May 1942, Mayor Stanley Lewis promised to have garbage men pickup trees still scattered around the city¹.

Apartment Blaze Believed Started By Burning Tree

Fire from a burning cast-off Christmas tree is believed to have caught under an eave of a two-storey extension at the rear of the Braemar Apartments, 171 Lisgar street, shortly before five o'clock yesterday afternoon. The flames extended into the cock loft and firemen had to pull down the ceiling of one room in the apartment occupied by B. O'Neil before they succeeded in getting them under control.

None of the occupants of the three-storey building were in any danger due to the fire. Smoke made its way into the top storey of the building and at first the fire looked more serious than it really was. Firemen from 2 and 8 stations responded to a tele-

phone call and later an alarm was rung from Cooper and Metcalfe streets.

The tree is believed to have been set on fire by youngsters playing with matches but fire department inspectors were unable to place the responsibility. The apartment building is owned by Mrs. Ora Jones of 171 Lisgar street. The loss includes damage to a portion of the roof and ceiling, one room as well as some smoke and water damage.

*Discarded Christmas Trees
were Fire Hazards*

*Ottawa Citizen, April 30, 1941
p.24*

Annual Christmas Tree Collection Begins in January 1946

Formal annual collection of Christmas trees began on January 7, 1946². At that time, they were taken to the city dump in Ottawa South, where Bronson Avenue is today. But that dump, which was designed to fill in a portion of the old Dow's Great Swamp, was near capacity.

1947 brought another important event, the enactment of the Canadian Citizenship Act. Before January 1, 1947, Canadians were British Subjects. As part of Citizenship Week observances, youngsters were asked to bring discarded Christmas trees to six playgrounds across Ottawa where they would be placed in circles surrounding a flagpole. During the evening of January 10th, as part of the celebration, there was a flag raising and Mayor Stanley Lewis broadcast over the radio and via loudspeaker to all in attendance. At each playground, chosen students then spoke on the topic 'Why I am Proud to be a Canadian'. While the main point was to celebrate Canadian citizenship, it also helped the Sanitation Department by centralizing much of the Christmas tree collection for 1947⁸.

Of the 30,000 trees believed to have been purchased for Christmas 1946, more than 21,000 trees were burned at the Ottawa South dump by January 21, 1947⁹.

In the spring of 1947, the City of Ottawa formally signed an agreement with Gloucester Township to redirect most garbage from the Ottawa South and Bayview dumps to a new facility near Billings Bridge. This was intended to fill in a ravine connected to Sawmill Creek that ran south near Kilborn Avenue and behind St. Thomas Aquinas Separate School.

1948 had trees again brought to playgrounds for 'Civic Night' and general collection was to begin on January 12th. The trees were again brought to Ottawa South dump and burned during the daytime over several days, using waste oil from service stations. More than 25,000 trees were expected to be collected¹¹.

River Road Dump Was in Gloucester

April 1947 brought some of the most dramatic flooding along the Rideau River in memory. This was covered in Historic Gloucester, Volume 13-1, Spring 2013. In the fall of the same year, the

Federal District Commission decided to expropriate all Rideau riverfront properties on the east side of the river from Mooney's Bay to the Ottawa River. It was intended to build a new Rideau River Parkway in the coming years. Much of that riverfront property was also the worst affected by flooding during the previous spring.

In the spring of 1948 and with the agreement of the City of Ottawa, the Township of Gloucester, and the Federal District Commission, low-lying land between Billings Bridge and Hurdman's Bridge was authorized to be used as a dump with four conditions. Gloucester Reeve Alexander Roger commented: *"If we want to get the National parkway built, and we want it as soon as possible, we must have the land filled. And using it as a dumping ground is the quickest and best way to get it filled."*¹² The specific location of the dump covered much of the area between Billings Bridge and Hurdman's Bridge, between Riverside Drive and the Rideau River. All of this property had been expropriated by the Federal District Commission in late 1947 and had previously been used for small scale farming including the well known Hurdman family farm.

In the following years, Christmas tree burning moved to the new River Road dump. One of the side benefits of closing the Ottawa South and Bayview dumps, was the reduction of rat infestations within the city limits. In addition, the use of bulldozers to immediately bury new garbage with earth, eliminated odour and prevented rat and other rodent nesting. The new dump location did not simply relocate the problem¹³.

A May 26, 1952 news story gives a report card on the River Road dump, which contradicted some of the previous claims. The article is titled *"River Seepage of 'Stinking Dump' Raises Protest in Ottawa South."*

The following quotes tell the story:

"The officials said the garbage disposal area was cheap, sanitary and served a useful purpose in filling up bog land along the Rideau River."

"The dump now extends for 1,100 feet east of Billings Bridge opposite Brighton Beach. The city spokesmen announced dumping would continue until swamp land is filled up as far as Hurdman's Bridge, making a parkway possible".

"In a letter to The Journal, the residents claimed the 'stinking dump' gave off 'offensive odors'; and contaminated the river."

"There is, of course, some seepage into the river but there is seepage all along the river from other sources just as detrimental."

"We admit there is some odor from the dump. We're doing all we can to stop it. Disinfectant is used and an 18-inch covering of earth is being spread."

"The dump, he claimed, was almost completely free of vermin. A cyanide solution is spread on the dump and the bulldozers crush surviving rats."

"When the FDC [Federal District Commission] gives the 'green light', we hope to fill in the entire riverside area from Hurdman's Bridge to Billings Bridge. In the area used for dumping so far, we have

raised the land four feet above the flood level." ¹⁴.

Author's comment – In reflection, following the tremendous flood of April 1947 and the repeated flooding in earlier years, there is no question that there has been a substantial improvement since this land was filled in. However, you have to wonder about river contamination that resulted in the closure of all beaches along the lower Rideau River in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Did this dump significantly contribute to the pollution problem?

By January 1953, the pile of Christmas trees had exceeded 10,000. A daytime bonfire was captured by an Ottawa Citizen photographer with a single young child being a thrilled witness ²². Did the two published photographs of the massive bonfire spark public interest to make this a public spectacle?



*One of the two photos published in the Ottawa Citizen
Ottawa Citizen, January 20, 1953 p.29*

The New Year of 1954 brought stories to the Ottawa Citizen of old New Years traditions:

"Did you 'burn out' the Old Year?"

Did you 'throw out the Old Year' in the shape of burning embers of wood?"

The people of Allendale in Northumberland were busy preparing for the centuries-old fire in the village square on New Year's Eve.

Shortly before midnight, tar barrels, lifted on to the heads of the dancers, were lit with a torch. After being carried round the village, the blazing barrels were thrown on to the bonfire stack in the middle of the square, and young men dance round the fire to the music of the band.

At Biggar in Lanarkshire, a similar ancient New Year custom was observed. The villagers 'burnt out the Old Year'. They lit bonfires on the hills at 9 o'clock in the evening, and these fires remained alight until New Year's Day.

Another New Year's custom is the 'Burning of the Clavie'. This was carried out by fishermen on the shores of the Moray Firth. A big fire was lit on a hilltop overlooking the sea, and when the flames died down, the sons and daughters of the fishermen ran up the slopes to gather the charred fragments because they are supposed to bring good fortune to fishermen and their families. Now what is the 'Clavie'? It is a tar barrel filled with fuel and mounted on a long pole.

No observance is more quaint than 'wassailing' the apple trees, which is carried out at Carhampton in Somerset on the eve of Twelfth Night (January 6). The health of the apple trees is drunk from the wassail bowl, the contents of which are warmed and spiced according to local tradition. In the Cotswold Hills and in the North, the children go round the villages singing the wassail song, 'Love and Joy Come to You.' And friendly passers-by drop a penny into the wassail bowl.

In one village, the people gathered round the largest tree in the orchard, fired guns through the branches, and drank to the health of the big tree with specially prepared cider. A girl played the fiddle, a young man under the tree played the accordion and everybody had great fun." ²³

The First Public Christmas Tree Bonfire in 1954

Ancient traditions and two photos published in the Ottawa Citizen a year earlier may have spurred interest in making the Christmas Tree bonfire a public event, but it was Snowshoers Union with the cooperation of the City of Ottawa that made it a reality. The union consisted of five Ottawa and Hull clubs including L'Aigle des Laurentides, Castor, Les Diables Bleu, Les Amis Choisis and L'Inseparable. The event was held on January 19, 1954 at 8:30 p.m. The snowshoers gathered for a parade at Bank Street and Grove Avenue at 7:45 p.m. and proceeded to the River Road dump where 40,000 discarded Christmas trees were piled to a depth of 50 feet. The parade was led by the Petits Forestiers band. There was community singing, fireworks and parking for 1,000 cars ²⁴. The estimated crowd was 15,000, who were brought to the site by 3,000 cars. "When it was all over, and fireworks had provided a final spectacle, Deputy Police Chief Leonard Greene remarked the crowd had been one of the best behaved he had ever seen." ²⁵

The Burning of the Greens

'The Burning of the Greens' is a Christian tradition of burning Christmas greenery including trees, wreaths and garland, to symbolize Christ's Light at the end of the Christmas season. Also known as the 'Festival of Lights' or Epiphany, it takes place on the Thursday closest to January 6th. This tradition dates back to 567 A.D. when the Twelfth Night celebration is believed to have begun. This is how we get the well-known Christmas song 'The Twelve Days of Christmas'.

First reference to 'The Burning of the Greens' in Ottawa newspapers appeared in the Ottawa Journal on January 15, 1948, when the Young Women's Mission Circle of Westboro United Church held a 'Twelfth Night Frolic' event.

'The Burning of the Greens' became associated with the Ottawa Christmas tree bonfire when the International Snowshoers convention was held in Ottawa from January 28th to 30th, 1955. The bonfire opened the convention at the River Road dump. A floodlit and coloured ice castle was also built in front of the Grandstand at Lansdowne Park along with an ice rink and a skating track³. More than 5,000 snowshoers were expected to attend the convention.

1956 was an Olympic Year and with that came another idea. The bonfire was the highlight of the city's winter carnival and was held on January 27th at 8 p.m. As described in the Ottawa Citizen the following day "A torch bearing tradition, Olympic style, was launched in Ottawa last night but in the irrepressible spirit of Bytown, some unknown citizen snatched all the glory by tossing a mere match to set off the civic Christmas tree bonfire. Marathon runner Ed Battison-torch held high-trotted from the Chateau Laurier to the Riverside dump only to find the trees already blazing 'There's always gotta be a smart alec,' fumed civic officials." Mayor Charlotte Whitton had lit the 'Olympic style torch' at the Chateau Laurier. Ed Battison had previously run in the Boston Marathon ²⁶.



Ice Palace, Lansdowne Park, January 1955
Photo courtesy of Don Wiggans and Lost Ottawa Facebook Page

The 1957 event was held on January 25th and the crowd was estimated at 4,000 in -18C temperatures. Nevertheless, *“the huge turn-out set Alderman St. Germaine thinking in terms of a full-scale carnival complete with refreshment stands-to mark the ‘burning of the greens’ next January. ‘There’s no reason why we shouldn’t have a skating party before the bonfire next year. We’re drawing good crowds, and we know now that we can control the fire. [Sanitation Superintendent] Jack May called his fire ‘probably the biggest in North America’ and compared its preparation to building the pyramids in Egypt. He admitted that [the fire recipe] contained 200 gallons of highly inflammable used dry-cleaning fluid. A public address system played ‘Meet Me Down at the Ball Game’ and other favorites”.* 27

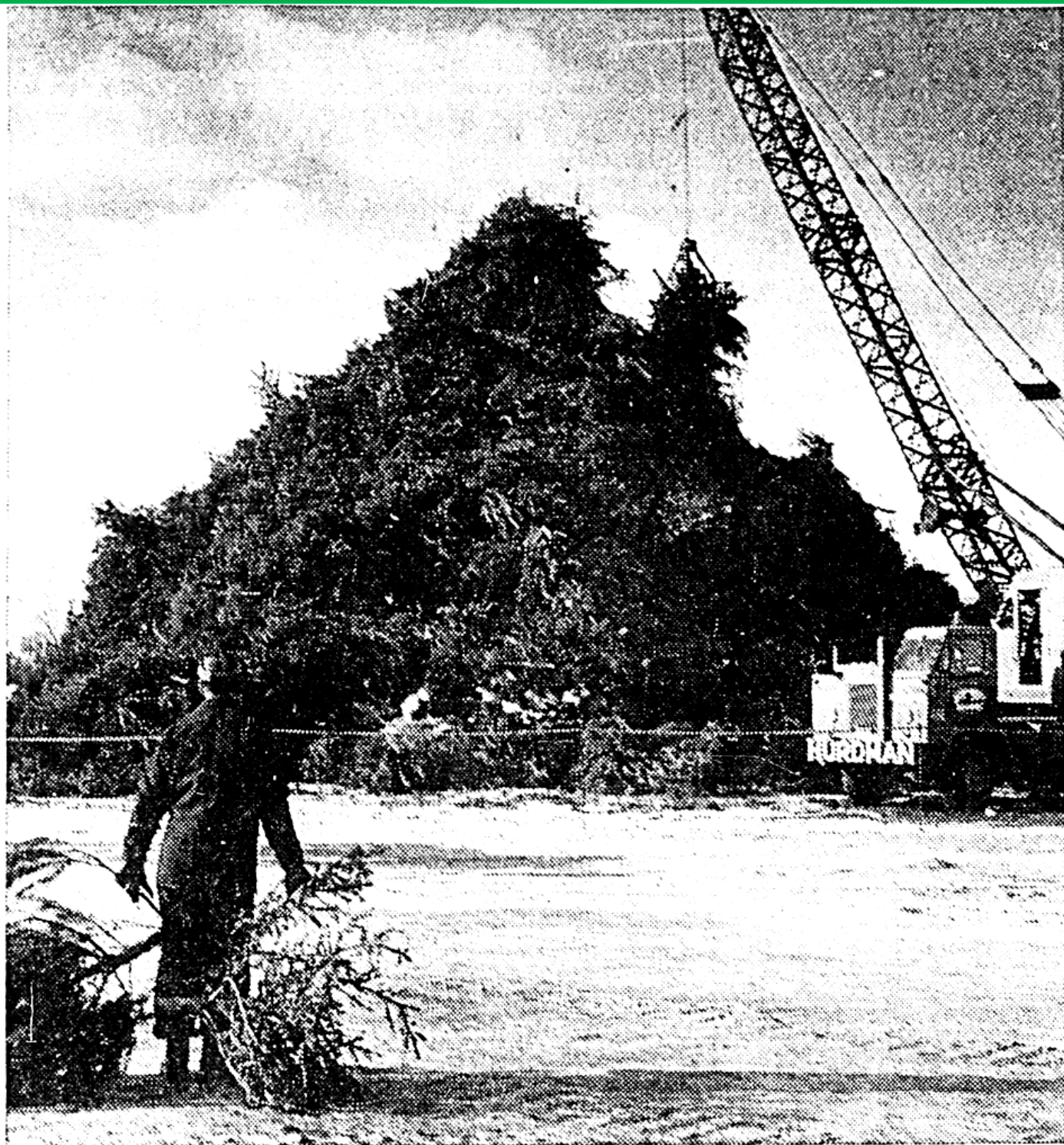
The 1958 event was held on January 31st. The crowd was bolstered to an estimated 15,000 by Ottawa University’s winter carnival and a parking lot expanded to a capacity of 5,000 vehicles that was close to full. The bonfire was considered a fire safety measure, as it encouraged Ottawa residents to take down their trees earlier, thus reducing the possibility of dried out trees from going up in flames. The trees were actually counted and totalled 47,859.

There was a refreshment stand, and popular music was played over a public address system. Because of heavy snow in the days preceding the bonfire, a large crane was brought in to shake out snow from the tree pile. Extra gasoline and varsol were applied to make sure that the trees burned. Ottawa Alderman Charlie St. Germain (1910-1980), who served on city council for 26 years, was the mastermind behind the event each year 28 29.

Near Tragedy in 1959

The 1959 bonfire on January 22nd did not go according to Hoyle. With 3,000 in attendance, the pile of trees was augmented with *“a mixture of varsol and oil [that] was used to soak the pile at the point where it was to be lit. Gaseous fumes had formed a pool near this point, and it flashed back to where the [fire] chief and [mayor] were, some five feet away, when the [mayor] applied the torch.”*

“Thousands of startled spectators at the Hurdman’s Bridge ‘Buring of the Greens’ saw the mayor and fire chief enveloped in a sheet of flame that burst from the base of the giant pile when the mayor applied a torch to it.”



GOT A MATCH, ANYONE?

At 8 o'clock tonight, the city will set fire to this huge pile of 50,000 Christmas trees that brightened thousands of Ottawa living rooms during the Yuletide season. Termed "The Burning of the Greens," it has been staged

annually for the past few years at the city's disposal grounds on Riverside Drive east of Smyth Road. Hundreds of spectators gather to watch the spectacular flames roar skyward, casting a red glow overhead.

—Photo by Newton

Referring to Mayor George Nelms: *"At his desk this morning, the mayor showed the result of his startling experience. His left eye was swollen almost shut, the left side of his face was inflamed and blistered, gone were his eyebrows and eyelashes. Gone also were his hat, overcoat and gloves, all burned so badly they had to be replaced."*

"Fire Chief [Maynard] Dolman sustained a badly blistered face, also on the left side, and he too lost his hat and overcoat in the sudden flash."

The immediate response was to express a need for extra precautions for any future event and that while Sanitary Branch workers will continue to pile up the trees, the actual igniting was to be supervised by Fire Department personnel with safety a prime consideration. In the past, this was mainly a Sanitation Department project ⁴⁵.

Mindful of this near tragedy, Ottawa Board of Control decided to purchase a Chipping Machine for the Parks and Recreation Department later in 1959 that could be borrowed by the Sanitation Department for the 1960 Christmas tree disposal ⁶.

The Burning of the Greens event was formally cancelled on January 4, 1960, when plans for the collection of Christmas trees was announced.

"There will be no 'burning of the greens' ceremony this year. Mayor Nelms has issued instructions to works officials to abandon the event which nearly brought serious injury to him and Fire Chief Maynard Dolman last year. A 'chipping' machine will be used in the outlying areas of the city to chop up the abandoned trees. The trees will be chopped up on the streets and immediately placed in trucks. Those not treated in this manner will be taken to city dumps and burned in a 'controlled' way." ⁷. In 1961, *"For the second year in a row, Christmas trees will be burned in small lots as they are collected instead of one huge bonfire"* ³⁰.

A similar process was followed in 1962; *"The annual collection of Christmas trees, to be burned at the city dump. Using 'controlled burning' methods, the more than 100,000 trees that adorned Ottawa homes during the festival season will be destroyed. The trees will be destroyed on days when there is little or no wind to reduce the chance of sparks being carried to start another fire."* ³¹

Surprisingly, the idea of public Christmas Tree bonfires was not entirely dead. When Eastview was given city status on January 1, 1963, the new city planned a five day 'Grand Fete' or winter carnival starting on February 20, 1963. This included a Christmas tree bonfire on Friday, February 22nd in River Road Park near Cummings Bridge ¹⁶.

New Garbage Disposal Site Selected

The River Road dump, later known as the Riverside dump and then the Riverside Garbage Disposal Area was officially closed on March 9, 1963. On March 11, 1963, the Nepean Bay Garbage Disposal Area opened. The latter was part of a land reclamation project which shrank Nepean Bay on the Ottawa River. It began with the installation of a stone berm along the new shoreline, with garbage used as fill between the berm and the original shoreline. This was designed to allow the construction of the Ottawa River Parkway into downtown and would offer new parkland adjacent to Lebreton Flats once the railway yards and industry were cleared. ¹⁵.

The Last Ottawa Christmas Tree Bonfires

The spectacle of Christmas tree bonfires was not completely done. Another was planned with public viewing on February 6, 1964 at the new Bayview garbage disposal area. *"viewed by public from [the] Civic Centre, south of Wellington Street Bridge, 7:30 p.m."* ¹⁷. When considering a 1965 public bonfire, *"Controller Ernie Jones said the Carnival Committee had its tree bonfire enthusiasm 'dampened' last year when rain ruined [the] tree blaze"* ¹⁸.

For 1965, trees were taken to the old River Road dump to be burned, starting with leftovers from retail tree lots¹⁸. But not everybody understood what was happening. *"Burning Discovered. The Saturday afternoon 'burning of the greens' was discovered by Alderman Charles St. Germain. The aldermen were unhappy. So was Mayor Don Reid. Alderman St. Germain said the situation was worse than it seemed; works department officials said no city trucks were out, and no one could possibly be collecting Christmas trees and burning them. 'They were Christmas trees, all right, burning down on the old Riverside Dump. I suppose the men were getting time and a half for working on Saturday. The air was full of smoke. and no one had notified the fire department.'" ²⁰*

This was followed with ward-by-ward tree pickup. “70,000 Evergreens, Christmas Tree Bonfire Tonight” was the headline in the Ottawa Journal on January 11, 1965. This was to be repeated for the remainder of the week at the former dump on Riverside Drive. ¹⁹.

One last ‘Burning of the Greens’ event was held as part of the inauguration of a \$3,000,000 building fundraising campaign at Carleton University on February 19, 1966. But piles of flammable materials are always a temptation, and the original stock of trees went up in flames more than a month before the big event. It was necessary to obtain another stockpile from the city ²¹. Clearly, such events had become a security risk.

Over the years, Christmas Tree bonfires became a part of Winter Carnival festivities from time to time, usually on a smaller scale. They took place in Eastview, Hull, Aylmer and other Eastern Ontario communities, but the 1966 Carleton University bonfire was the last large publicly held ‘Burning of the Greens’ in Ottawa.

Merry Christmas to all and always be safe when handling live Christmas trees.

I discourage everybody from holding their own ‘Burning of the Greens’ event.

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- 6 Ottawa Journal, May 20, 1959, Page 2
- 7 Ottawa Citizen, January 4, 1960, Page 7
- 8 Ottawa Citizen, January 7, 1947, Page 10
- 9 Ottawa Journal, January 22, 1947, Page 1
- 10 Ottawa Citizen, January 5, 1948, Page 2
- 11 Ottawa Citizen, January 12, 1948, Page 12
- 12 Ottawa Journal, May 4, 1948, Page 3
- 13 Ottawa Citizen, January 6, 1951, Page 2
- 14 Ottawa Journal, May 26, 1952, Page 3
- 15 Ottawa Citizen, March 9, 1963, Page 9
- 16 Ottawa Journal, February 13, 1963, Page 4
- 17 Ottawa Citizen, February 4, 1964, Page 30
- 18 Ottawa Journal, January 6, 1965, Page 11
- 19 Ottawa Journal, January 11, 1965, Page 17
- 20 Ottawa Citizen, January 5, 1965, Page 3
- 21 Ottawa Journal, January 18, 1966, Page 17
- 22 Ottawa Citizen, January 20, 1953, Page 29
- 23 Ottawa Citizen, January 2, 1954, Page 23
- 24 Ottawa Journal, January 16, 1954, Page 16
- 25 Ottawa Journal, January 20, 1954, Page 3
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- 37 Ottawa Journal, January 7, 1936, Page 2

One account of a Christmas Tree fire

Christmas Tree Fire Brings Appeal to Remove Them

Ottawa’s first Christmas tree fire this year broke out this morning at the home of Eldon Green, 180 Britannia Road, Britannia Village at 11:50 o’clock, following a short circuit in the tree’s decorative lighting system.

Firemen were able to extinguish the blaze before it caused much damage, but the incident brought forth a strong appeal from Fire Chief Foote for other homes in the city to get rid of their Christmas trees at once, if they have not already done so.

Christmas trees are by now a definite hazard

inside the home, he said. These trees are one of the most serious fire hazards ever brought in the home, most experts agree, and by the New Year they are usually so dried up that the danger is greatly increased.

The Britannia Road fire this morning was brought under control by firemen before it had caused more damage than scorching the walls and ceilings.

But Fire Chief Foot emphasized that other outbreaks of this nature might easily have tragic results. He urged all householders to remove the risk of such a disaster by removing the Christmas tree.

Ottawa Journal, January 4, 1956 p.2



COME TO CARLETON UNIVERSITY FOR THE BURNING OF THE GREENS

the Ottawa kick-off ceremony for Carleton's \$3,000,000 Campaign* when the city's 80,000 Christmas trees will be ignited for a huge bonfire

TOMORROW

Saturday, February 19, 7 p.m.

SPECIAL ATTRACTIONS:

- A torch will be run by Carleton students from "the old Carleton" on First Avenue to the Rideau River campus and the site of the "Burning".
- Mayor Don B. Reid, Carleton President Davidson Dunton and Carleton's Winter Weekend Queen will arrive in a snow cutter drawn by students at 7.00 p.m.
- Ceremonial lighting of the greens by President Dunton at 7.10 p.m.
- Music by the HMCS "Carleton" Band.
- Emcee is CKOY's "Foxy" John Fox — records and dancing in the snow.

* Carleton University is conducting a campaign to raise \$3,000,000 for capital expansion. The University must raise this amount if it is to accommodate a student enrolment of nearly 7,000 by 1970.

COMING EVENTS AT CARLETON

- Le Centre Dramatique du Conservatoire de Montreal presents "Horace", tomorrow, February 19 at 2.30 and 8.30 p.m. in Carleton's Alumni Theatre.
- Basketball: Carleton Ravens vs. Sir George Williams University in Carleton's Gymnasium tomorrow, February 19 at 8.15 p.m.
- Art Exhibit by Roy Kiyooka opens in the H. M. Tory Science Building at 8.00 p.m. Sunday, February 20.
- CBC - Carleton Concert in the Alumni Theatre, Sunday, February 20, 8.30 p.m. presents Tom Kines and Ed Honeywell.



FOLLOW THIS MAP TO "THE BURNING OF THE GREENS"

- Carleton University will hold Open House on Friday, February 25 from 7.00 to 10.00 p.m. and Saturday, February 26 from 10.00 a.m. to 5.00 p.m. There will be guided tours of all buildings, classroom exhibits, laboratory demonstrations and as a special attraction Carleton students will hold a kite-flying contest at 11.00 a.m. on February 26 in the University's main quadrangle in front of the Arts, Science and Library Buildings. Everyone is welcome.

OTC Bus service to the campus is route 1A (Bank-Seneca)

Tragic Christmas Tree Fire Near Billings Bridge

Three Near Death in Christmas Tree Fire

Billings Bridge Blaze

Father, Mother and Child are Victims

(Ottawa Journal, December 27, 1949 p. 1)

Conditions of the three victims of this morning's blaze at Billings Bridge was still described as "very critical" at press time this afternoon.

A war veteran, his wife and their five-year-old son were hanging to life by thin threads at Civic Hospital today after a Christmas tree exploded into fire and leveled their Billings Bridge home early this morning.

In hospital, suffering from second and third degree burns to their bodies, legs and hands, in deep shock and unconscious are:

Corporal Enos McEwan, 27, his wife, Olive, 29 and their son, Sidney, aged five years.

At press time today, hospital authorities said the trio were "near death".

Less seriously burned was another son, Garry McEwan, aged nine years, who suffered first degree burns to his hands and neck when he snatched Sidney from his blazing cot.

Garry was taken to the home of his grandparents, Mr. and Mrs. "Jake" McEwan, 360 Preston street, where his burns were treated.

Three other children were saved by the prompt action of their parents. They are: Margaret, three years, Terina, two years, and Vivian, 17 months.

The family returned to their home last evening after spending Christmas with Mrs. McEwan's parents, Mr. and Mrs. Cecil Matheson, Carling Avenue, McKellar.

Just Awakening

At the McEwans' home, one mile south of Billings Bridge, the parents and children were just awakening about eight o'clock this morning.

The home is a temporary one, providing emergency shelter since the family was flooded out of Nordic Circle last Spring. Corporal McEwan had started construction on a new home near the site of his tem-

porary, one-storey frame shelter.

First moments of the horror which filled the family home after the discovery of the fire are still but hazy, terror-filled shadows.

The terror of Corporal McEwan waking to find the roof blazing above his head: the fear of his wife for her children when she woke to find her clothing ablaze on a bedside chair: the horror of five young children who feared something they were too young to understand.

But stand-out in courage in the family is Garry. He woke to find the home full of smoke. "I rolled out of bed", the young hero later told The Journal. "I saw fire at the corner of the house near Sidney's bed. It was burning near the floor, and all up the wall. It was awful. I could smell something burning. It must have been Sid's hair, 'cause I smelled the same thing later when Mommy and Daddy had their heads burned."

The brave young tot, still dressed only in a set of long underwear and holding his salvaged hands from his body as pain and shock made him tremble, tried to recall the frantic two minutes before the family got out of the house.

Patted Out Fire

"I got to Sidney's bed, and grabbed him. It hurt terribly. My hands sort of sizzled, but I managed to hold on and dragged him to the floor. His hair was burning, and I patted his head and the fire went out."

As he talked, Garry kept shaking his hands as he held them out at arm's length. They were blistered and raw.

After Garry got Sidney from the bed, his mother snatched the child from the floor and ran out the front door, holding the young boy to her breast, and moaning piteously.

She, too, was a mass of flame from head to feet. She was dressed only in a slip and one stocking. She made it to the street through the muddy lane which leads to the home.

Louis Gendron, head of a construction firm engaged in building new homes a block from McEwan's saw fire billowing from the roof of the shack.

"My men and I had just come to work at 8:30:, he told The Journal. "Just as we started to work one of them, called and pointed across the street."

"I looked, and saw flames pouring from the roof of the house. Moments later the front door burst open and Mr. McEwan ran out and raced down the street."

Hair Afire

"His hair was a mass of flames, and he kept screaming "Fire! Fire!" His face was burned black. I guess he was going for a phone, the nearest one is nearly a block away.

"I ran towards the house and Mrs. McEwan came out clutching a small boy. She was dressed in a slip and it was blazing. I saw a stocking puff up her leg in flame."

Mr. Gendron smothered the fire on Mrs. McEwan's slip and hair with his hands. They were burned in the process.

Thrown Through Windows

Garry got out just after his mother had taken Sidney. He could not remember how the other three children escaped, but it is believed Corporal McEwan and his wife hurled them to safety through windows. They were found wandering, half-clothed near the house a few minutes later. None of them were burned.

Lyle Smith, former Provincial constable, employed on the Gendron project, brought his years of police training into play and quickly organized relief for the injured.

He took Mrs. McEwan and Sidney into his car and raced to Civic Hospital. Exclusive Ambulance, called by a neighbor, took the father.

The disastrous blaze was blamed on a combination of a Quebec heater and a Christmas tree.

The stove is believed to have fired the tinder-dry evergreen, and the resulting near-explosion turned the whole home into a raging inferno.

Cecil Matheson, with whom the family had spent Christmas, told The Journal he had warned his son-in-law only last evening about the danger of the stove-tree combination.

"Last thing I said before they left for home last

night was 'watch the draft on that Quebec heater of yours, Enos'"

Deputy Chief Leo Sabourin, of the Gloucester Fire Department, called by neighbours, said the whole house was beyond saving when he and Mel Law, a volunteer, arrived.

"She was really going. There was nothing we could do to stop her. We were lucky to keep it from spreading."

Etched in Heat

After the flames had died to a glowing mass of red embers, with a few charred wall posts still standing near one corner, neighbours grouped silently around the scene, [and] still could see the white-hot framework of a small doll's pram. Near it, and equally hot, was the larger counterpart that had been owned by one of the children.

Corporal McEwan was one of the first members of the Canadian Army to get overseas in World War II. He served with the Royal Canadian Engineers, and was severely wounded at Dunkirk. In 1944, he returned home to Canada. He is now employed as a maintenance supervisor at No. 26 Central Ordnance Depot, Plouffe Park.

Sadly, mother Olive McEwan died of her burns on January 16, 1950 and Corporal Enos McEwan died of a heart attack on March 25, 1950, just one day after being released from hospital.



*Olive and Corporal Enos McEwan with son Garry
Ottawa Journal, December 27, 1949 p.1*

Membership Form—Gloucester Historical Society/Société historique de Gloucester
(Membership year runs from April 1 to March 31.)

Annual Membership - \$20.00 for one year _____ 10 year Membership \$150.00 _____

NAME: _____ Email Address: _____

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Notice—Effective October 25, 2024, the Grace Johnston History Room is permanently closed. Please check our website periodically for future access to Gloucester Historical Society records.



Surviving children of the McEwan Fire

From left to right— Terina, Margaret, Vivian, and Garry McEwan with their uncle William McMullen

Ottawa Journal, December 27, 1949, p.1