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Vol. 6 No. 1

June 2023

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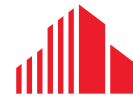
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Wilmot soldier Glen Goebel's grave is in a cemetery in Hasnon Churchyard in France, along with 17 other Canadian soldiers. (Courtesy [www.1cemeteries.com](http://www.1cemeteries.com))

# Our Heritage Our Home

Vol. 6, No 1 June 2023

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**Editor:** Paul Knowles ([pknowles@golden.net](mailto:pknowles@golden.net))  
**Advertising:** Sharon Leis ([sharonbleis@gmail.com](mailto:sharonbleis@gmail.com))

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**Contributors:** Rod Charles, Paul Knowles, Fred Lichti,  
Nancy Silcox, Marie Voisin.

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# MAKING MAYORAL HISTORY

*By Paul Knowles*

There is no question that Natasha Salonen has made history. Last fall, she was elected as the first female mayor of the Township of Wilmot. At age 28, she is also one of the youngest people ever to be elected to the office of mayor anywhere in Canada.

But Mayor Salonen doesn't dwell on her glass ceiling-smashing accomplishment, because she believes she is following in the footsteps of a number of impressive Waterloo Region women who have made their mark in politics – she points specifically to Regional Chair Karen Redmond and former Ontario cabinet minister Elizabeth Witmer. And she adds a statistic perhaps unnoticed by many of us – right now, the majority of council leaders across the Region of Waterloo are women.

A quick role call confirms this – Regional Council is headed by Redmond; mayors include Sue Foxton (North Dumfries), Sandy Shantz (Woolwich), Jan Liggett (Cambridge), Dorothy McCabe (Waterloo) and Salonen (Wilmot) – that's six of the eight top positions in the Region.

But while offering a clear and promising snapshot of the current state of the Region, it's still true that Salonen made history, in an election that was destined to do so – because the only two candidates for Mayor in Wilmot were women. Salonen defeated councillor Jenn Pfenning in the race.

Natasha Salonen was born and raised in Wilmot township, living in New Hamburg until Grade 5, and then moving slightly east to Baden, where she still lives today. She shares a house with her parents. Her mother, Carolyn Salonen, is the principal of Waterloo-Oxford District Secondary School – where Natasha attended

high school.

After initially enrolling in university in Ottawa, Natasha moved to England, graduating after studying bio-ethics at Oxford University for three years. She was offered employment in the U.K., but family considerations brought her back to the community she now leads. Her father, Mark Salonen, has had ALS for more than 18 years, and Natasha returned home to help her family. "Dad's care needs had increased," she told me. "It was an opportunity to come here and help my parents."

Her intimate involvement in health care – and what she sees as inequities in that system – sparked an interest in politics. Some of the disadvantages are counter-intuitive, she says. For instance, at one point, "Mom was told to quit her job to go on welfare" to access needed health care benefits. So, "from a young age, I have wanted to change the whole health care system and the whole taxation system."

Those, of course, are not municipal issues – and Salonen's first experiences with the Canadian political scene were on the federal, and then provincial levels. After being involved in student politics at Oxford, she returned home eager to continue that kind of involvement. She arrived back in Wilmot and quickly volunteered to work as a volunteer for then-M.P.

**Mayor Salonen says that she is following in the footsteps of a large contingent of female political leaders in recent history of the Region of Waterloo.**

*(Photos by Paul Knowles)*



Harold Albrecht in the federal election. That experience led to an opportunity to work as a staff member in the office of local M.P.P. Mike Harris Jr., where she stayed for three years. During her campaign for mayor, though, she was careful to position herself as open and inclusive on matters in social and personal categories.

Early in 2022, she went to work in the office of Lisa Thompson, Ontario Minister of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs. She left that job when she made the perhaps surprising decision to run for mayor in Wilmot – and even Salonen herself may have been a bit surprised by the move. “Municipal politics had never been on my radar,” she admits.

That move was probably met with a lot of skepticism in some circles. At the time, it seemed as though it would be a three-person race between incumbent mayor Les Armstrong, Pfenning, and newcomer Salonen. In the end, of course, Armstrong was not a candidate.

Salonen explains that some people suggested she run for a seat as a councillor, not for the top job, but she was focused on issues that required a seat at Regional Council as well as in Wilmot council chambers: economic development, and the attraction and development of people with the skill sets to “provide more opportunities here.” And only the mayor represents Wilmot at the regional level. She adds that her personal observations in the township had led to a “sense that it might be a change election.” And it was – an entirely new council took office, as three incumbents chose not to run, and three others were defeated in their races.

Salonen says she has learned a lot through her experiences, working for government and then running for – and winning – an elected seat. Most important? “Being honest and open with who you are,” she says.

She adds, “It really frustrates me when people say they don’t trust politicians, to ‘blanket statement’ a whole profession that way.”

She admits some of this arises because of “the way the system is designed.” But she believes this can be overcome, as political leaders are “honest and transparent... I’ve really come to respect politicians who try not to bullshit their way thought something.”

Salonen says that one of the best things about being involved at the municipal level is the absence of blatant party politics. She says that in working for the provincial cabinet minister, she learned “the value of working with people who don’t share the same opinion with you.” And she laughs, adding, “And I’m not always right!”

She says that the member of the new Wilmot council – all of whom are new in the job – is a place of “great discussions where we don’t all agree,” but that this leads to “compromise and good decisions.”

The mayor stresses “the importance of different voices and opinions on council... I’m happy with the balance we have.”

Salonen says one goal is that “members of the community feel reflected and relevant” by their council. And she argues that disagreement does not need to lead to animosity: “You don’t need to agree with your neighbour on everything, but you can still be a nice person.”

Salonen recognizes that she is in a unique place, when it comes to the regional government scene – and she doesn’t mean her gender. “As a young person, I have seen so many people move away. If I didn’t live with my parents, I couldn’t afford to live in Wilmot township,” she says. “We need to address that, now.” And that can best be addressed at the regional level, according to Salonen. Thus, her unprecedented campaign for mayor: “I think it’s good to bring that voice.”

That doesn’t mean she finds Regional governance to be a walk in the park. “It’s a very difficult dynamic when you have 16 local voices... there is a lot more playing politics than at the local level.”

And she points to the irony, concerning one current regional is-

sue. When it comes to discussions about the cost of homes, homelessness, and such, “All my colleagues own their own home.”

Nonetheless, Salonen still has faith in the system – and the people elected in it: “We are human beings trying to better our community.”



**Natasha Salonen is the first women in the history of Wilmot township or New Hamburg (when it was a separate municipality) to sit in the Mayor’s Chair.**

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# Baden councillor cares about kids

By Paul Knowles

When Harvir Sidhu was elected to Wilmot council last fall, representing Ward 3 (Baden and area), he knew he – and his council colleagues – were making history... but he wasn't very concerned about that aspect of his election.

The 2022 municipal election resulted in a brand new council; it produced the first female mayor of Wilmot township; and it saw the election of the first Sikh, and second-ever person of colour, to be a member of the municipal council.

Natasha Salonen is Wilmot's first female mayor, and is featured in an accompanying article in this magazine. Harvir is only the second person from a visible minority to serve on council – Elliot Fung represented the New Dundee area, until his unsuccessful run for mayor in 2018. (Full disclosure: that was also the occasion of an unsuccessful mayoral campaign by this author, who finished behind Fung and two others – Terry Broda and successful candidate Les Armstrong).

As noted, Harvir did not think that being a person of colour was all that important – he won handily in a ward where, visible minorities are just that – very much in the minority. He told me, "It's not because I am a minority person that I got elected." Colour, he says, "didn't matter" in the vote – he polled 66% of the 1,600 people who voted, only a handful of whom would have been from

visible minorities. "I think most people are fine with this issue," he adds.

But on the day he was sworn into office, he saw things from a different, although also positive, perspective. As his family attended the ceremony, he realized "My kids are going to grow up in this town, knowing that, while we look different, 'my Dad is on council'. It gives them a sense of belonging."

Harvir believes the new Wilmot council offers "a good representation of our community... good demographics," including the fact that "half of our council is under the age of 36," while others are decades older.

Harvir has lived in Baden for 16 years. Before that, he grew up in Tavistock. His parents had moved from Toronto to Tavistock in 1991, when Harvir was four, because they purchased a gas station in that community.

He admits that, growing up in a family running a small, hands-on business, entrepreneurship comes naturally to him. So while his first career was as a corrections officer, he took a leave of absence from that job five years ago, to buy the Twice the Deal Pizza franchise in New Hamburg, even though "I hadn't made a pizza in my life!" Today, with six employees, the business is thriving – even in an increasingly crowded market, with a seventh pizza store about to open in New Hamburg (there were four when he started).

And he says that his corrections career is over – "I don't want to go back to jail!"

Now, Harvir's wife, Tejveer Sidhu, is opening a second food business, a take-out Indian restaurant in the new plaza beside Sobey's in New Hamburg. Harvir describes his role in the new business as "helping". They hope to open this summer, when construction of

Harvir Sidhu says, "My kids are going to grow up in this town, knowing that, while we look different, 'my Dad is on council'. It gives them a sense of belonging."



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the plaza is completed.

Just as “business” has always been in Harvir’s blood, so have politics. “I’ve always had a political interest,” he says. “And I always like to serve the community.” His pizza store is known for supporting community causes.

So in 2022, “the opportunity presented itself,” with the retirement from council of Baden councillor Barry Fisher. Harvir says, “I am a long-time Baden resident,” and so he thought he might have a chance to win the seat. He consulted with Fisher about the details of the job.

After his successful campaign, he came to council with some goals in mind. Key was “to lower the temperature of local municipal politics,” which had become, shall we say, rancorous.

Asked if there have been any surprises in store for a new councillor, Harvir is blunt: “the financial situation was a big shock.”

He says one of his priorities is to “set up the township for financial success going forward... to get our books in order.”

He told me that “we were the first council in 17 years to push back on the initial budget presentation” from staff. “We are completely overhauling the budget process.”

He also wants to “do something for the youth in Baden. To find creative solutions for the kids.”

Harvir hopes council can find a way to “cut a lot of the red tape” that has encumbered decision-making and business growth in the township.

The Baden councillor says that the new council is not always of one mind on all things. There is much discussion and debate, he says, both in camera and in public session of council. But when a decision is reached, he adds, councillors stand united in supporting the democratic outcome. “If we all agreed,” he adds with a smile, “something’s wrong!”



**Harvir and his son, taking his new council seat for a test-drive.** (Photos courtesy Harvir Sidhu)

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# A Visit to SUNFISH Lake



Edna, as pictured on the cover of “Edna’s Circle: Edna Staebler’s Century of Friendships,” by Nancy Silcox

**By Nancy Silcox**

The arrival of the annual Milk Calendar delivered more to famed *Food That Really Schmecks* cookbook writer Edna Staebler than recipes for egg custard, mac’ n’ cheese and milk shakes.

“The squares marking the days of the month are big enough for me to write down everybody who’s visiting me,” Edna would cheerily proclaim. “Even if I have two or three visitors on certain days, I have room to schedule them.”

No exaggeration here. A peek at Edna’s indispensable Milk Calendar revealed that the nonagenarian’s dance-card was full most days – slotted in morning, afternoon and evening intervals.

Requests to be added to her guest list involved patience. “I seem to be booked up for the next three weeks, Nancy,” she apologized when I telephoned to see when she was free for a wee visit. “Dr. Rosehart from WLU is coming to talk about the scholarship they’re setting up in my name; Veronica Ross comes once a week to interview for the book she’s writing on me; and Kevin, next door drops in regularly... But how about Thursday morning the 24th of September?”\*

Like all who came to know the legendary Waterloo County writer and broadcaster, I adored Edna and was delighted to wait.

In her early 90’s, when I first came to know her in the early 2000’s, Edna remained sharp, engaged and funny. And delighted to share with others, the adventures of the guests who had paid homage at her door.

One favourite story, occurring over a number of years in the mid-1980’s, saw a series of callers in pinstripe suits, carrying shiny briefcases and representing two of the giants in the Canadian food industry, come calling. Ah! It was The Great Cookie Wars debacle!

### **Edna and the Battle of the Railroad Cookies**

Edna had included a recipe for *Rigglevake* (Railroad) cookies in her best-selling *Food that Really Schmecks* cookbook. The original had come courtesy of her dear Old Order Mennonite friend “Bevvy Martin”. Chewy on the inside, crisp on the outside, the light and dark cookies were a hit with cooks across the country.

The company Proctor & Gamble had been manufacturing and selling a similar cookie for a number of years. But when competitor Nabisco Foods introduced a similar product, the fur began to fly. P&G sued Nabisco for copyright infringement. Enter the lawyers.

Nabisco needed to prove that P&G’s recipe was not a patented one, owned by them. Indeed, they challenged that the “crisp on the outside; chewy on the inside” recipe was a time-honoured favourite of Waterloo County Mennonite cooks.

When investigators for Nabisco found a dead ringer called *Rigglevake* cookies found in the popular Canadian cookbook, *Food That Really Schmecks* by author Edna Staebler, they were sure that P&G’s claims to exclusivity were faulty.

Over the next five years during the court battle of what came to be known as “The Cookie Wars,” lawyers from both P&G and Nabisco made their way to Sunfish Lake to chat with “the source”: Mrs. Edna Staebler.

Reports were passed on that no one left Edna’s cottage without a smile on their face or goodies in their tummies.

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**Edna Staebler with academics Dr. John Weir and Dr. Robert Rosehart.** (All photos courtesy Nancy Silcox)

Once the early investigations concluded, the scene shifted to a New York courtroom for the legal decision. Edna and her niece Barbie had been flown to “The Big Apple” to watch the proceedings. The ladies were put up at the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel and wined and dined by representatives from both sides. The case ended in 1989 with Nabisco being made to pay \$120 million for infringement on P&G’s copyright.

Edna’s “stock” had risen like a helium balloon during the five years of the Cookie Wars. She was interviewed by major TV networks from each side of the border. An original play called “The Cookie Wars” was written and played to sold-out audiences at the Blyth Festival. Edna, who’d been driven from Waterloo to Blyth in a stretch limousine, was centre stage on opening night.

Over the ensuing years of Edna’s long and eventful life, and for a myriad of rapt listeners visiting Sunfish Lake, the “Cookie Wars” story was a run-away favourite.

And Edna, never adverse to the spotlight, always did the tale justice.

**“Dr. Bob” and the Blueberry Muffins**

One of the early missions that Robert Rosehart set out on, in his early days as incoming Wilfrid Laurier University President, was an excursion to Sunfish Lake to visit Edna Staebler. Edna, then 91, was an important donor to the University and in recognition of her status as one of Waterloo Region’s literati, a scholarship called the Edna Staebler Award for Creative Non-Fiction had been set up some years before, to select and celebrate young writers.

But, in Rosehart’s inaugural year, 1997, the scholarship fund had come up short. University minds agreed that either the amount awarded to the upcoming year’s winner of Edna’s award would have to be reduced or Edna would have to add more dollars to the pot.

The genial “Dr. Bob” was sent to Sunfish Lake on the mission. He recalls his first meeting: “I immediately liked Edna and the conversation between us was easy. We first talked about issues that interested us both and then I brought up the Staebler Award money issue. That conversation went well and I left feeling that much had been accomplished.”

It wasn’t until the President’s trip back to Waterloo in reviewing the conversation that he realized that something had gone awry. “It struck me what had really happened. I had come out to get more money for the Award; I had left a couple of hours later promising to cover the shortfall myself. And from the President’s own budget! So until the end of my term, 10 years later, the President’s Office continued to top-up Edna’s award. I sure had fixed the problem all right!”

There were no hard feelings on the University’s end, and visits to Sunfish Lake endured till Edna went into long-term care. Over these years, rumours persisted of Dr. Robert Rosehart’s addiction to Edna’s blueberry muffins. He periodically addressed the concerns: “I’m aware that the story went around that I laid waste to Edna’s muffins every time I visited. I’ve heard numbers up to 12 muffins in one visit. That’s an exaggeration but I do admit to enjoying 8 or 10 of them.”

**Edna’s Portrait**

Not all of Edna’s callers came purely for tea and a visit with the beloved author. Waterloo Region artist Peter Etril Snyder, who had travelled in Edna circles for a number of years, had requested she sit for a portrait. Edna, no shrinking violet, had readily agreed.

Before the actual sitting commenced, Snyder had given considerable thought to the composition.

“My vision was not to do a formal portrait of her but one that showed a representation of the objects that made up Edna’s world at Sunfish Lake – the cats, the pictures on her walls, the assorted bric-a-brac which she treasured. This would be no sweet little old lady sitting in a rocking chair.”

Snyder also wanted to convey the sense of colour that dominated Edna’s living space – the reds and oranges of the many quilts and afghans scattered through the cozy sitting area which overlooked Sunfish Lake, the embroidered throw pillows scattered about, the vibrant modern art on her walls.

Over the coming 12 weeks, Snyder made regular visits to Edna’s cottage, planning, painting, and chatting with his genial subject. It had been agreed between them that the portrait would



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not be viewed by its subject until it was completed and ready to hang. The honoured location was the Concourse of the Kitchener Public Library. A public ceremony would mark the occasion.

As the big day approached, over 100 library staff and civic officials, the media and various invited guests were invited to the unveiling. Edna, animated and anticipatory, was seated in the front row.

Peter Etril Snyder later recalled Edna's reaction as her portrait was unveiled.

"It's way too bright," she cried, quite audibly. "And I look like a turtle!" [a reference to Edna's hooded eyelids]. He added fondly, "Reserve and reticence had never been Edna's strong suit!"

Snyder added that while the inimitable Ms. Staebler never came to love the painting, she "made peace with it, and she was as proud as punch that it had been done."

He notes that Edna did approve of the representation of her cat Mally, seated on her lap. Snyder passed away in 2017.

### Edna's Final Days

In April 2005, at age 99, Edna entered Columbia Forest Long Term Care in Waterloo. It would be her final home.

Visits from friends, family, colleagues and admirers who had been Edna's lifeblood over her senior years continued. While the centenarian relished each and every visitor, the steady stream tired her considerably. Staff now actively needed to curtail the queue so Edna could rest. An auspicious day, her 100th birthday celebration was on the horizon.

Columbia Forest Personal Support Worker (PSW) Michaela Hajkova recalled the days after the *Grande Fête* of January 15, 2006: "It seemed that she had been holding on, being strong for other people because she knew how important the celebration was to them. But after the party was over, she seemed so very weary. She just let go."



Edna with author Nancy Silcox at Sunfish Lake.

But, Hajkova recalls, there was something Edna had to finish before she left this life. She was determined to finish novelist Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*.

"She'd been reading the *Da Vinci Code* for a while...but at the last, it became too much effort for her to hold up the book and read the words on the page." Hajkova took time in her workday to read to Edna. With only 11 pages to go, Edna had another stroke and slipped into a coma. Cognizant of Edna's fervent desire to finish the book (one she felt had been poorly written!) Hajkova sat by Edna's side and read the final pages. "I have no doubt in my mind that Edna heard every word to the last."

Edna Staebler passed away on September 16, 2006.

\*The interviews and conversations recalled in this article are drawn from the book *Edna's Circle: Edna Staebler's Circle of Friendships*. Author Nancy Silcox. Pandora Press, Kitchener, 2007.

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# TO HONOUR AND REMEMBER THEM

By Marie Voisin

How often have you looked at the names on the cenotaph beside the library in New Hamburg? If you are like most people, probably never. It is merely a list of people who perished during WWI and WWII. But it is more than that. It represents our past, present and future.

There are so many things that we take for granted in this country. The liberty to speak our minds and forge our own future is an entitlement that for many of us, was never earned. That honour belongs to the men and women who built this country and the men and women who have defended it. To these rare and brave Canadians, we must never lose our gratitude for their sacrifice and service. (1)

In March 2022, in order to spotlight men and women who served in wars to protect Canada, a memorial banner campaign was begun by New Hamburg's Legion 532. It was a way of honouring all individuals who safeguarded our future. A secondary purpose was to increase public awareness of our Veteran's history and sacrifices and to honour them all for more than just two minutes on November 11th each year. (2) Seventy-five banners were displayed along Peel and Huron Streets celebrating the people who served. They were the sons, daughters, parents and grandparents of Wilmot Township residents.

Many of the banners reflected the early deaths of some soldiers who perished while serving in Europe, while others were of soldiers and nurses who, after serving for two to six years, returned home and continued with their lives. The banners are not just of Wilmot soldiers – they are also of individuals whose families now live in New Hamburg.

## World War I

During WWI [1914-1918], more than 128 soldiers from Wilmot fought and 16 were killed in action. They all had remarkable lives before the war and some were lucky enough to return to them. Four of these young men will be spotlighted in this section of the article.

One of these individuals, Glen R. Goebel [a.k.a. Glennie] was born in New Hamburg in 1894 and was working as a clerk in his father's grocery store when he enlisted on March 21, 1916. He lived with his family at 154 Jacob Street. He was 22, 5'6" with a

medium complexion, blue eyes and light brown hair. He sailed from Halifax on the S.S. Tuscania and arrived in Liverpool, England on October 6, 1916. He received further training in England before being shipped to France on November 14, 1916.

Glennie's father, Frederick, received a letter from Glennie while he was fighting in the trenches in France. Glennie enclosed an epaulet cut from the coat of a German prisoner. He wrote that he had been through some of the hard fighting since April last and referred to a desperate drive against the enemy that lasted a whole week and through which he came out without a scratch. He reported that the weather was fairly good at the time of writing and that the crops in France appeared to be satisfactory. Glennie wrote as though he intended to stay in the fight until the finish. (3) He was transferred to the Runner Section of the 4th Battalion of the Canadian Headquarters.

A year later at the age of 24, he was killed in action on October 21, 1918 in Hasnon, France. A fellow soldier sent the following letter to Glennie's mother:

*Dear Mrs. Goebel:*

*It is with deep regret that I write to inform you of the circumstances of death in action of your son, No. 730696 Pte. G. R. Goebel.*

*Glennie had been in the Battalion Runners of this unit for over 14 months and as I am employed in the Orderly Room, I came to know him very well.*

*He was very popular around headquarters and his death was a blow to us all. The circumstances of his death are these:*

*The battalion Headquarters was established in a house on the square of a French village. The town was being subjected to enemy artillery fire. Glennie was standing in the doorway of the headquarters talking to a number of us, who were standing just inside the door, when a shell exploded just outside the door. A piece of shrapnel hit Glennie on the forehead*

*killing him instantly. He never spoke a word after he was hit, death being instantaneous.*

*His body was buried in a cemetery with a*

**The banner honouring Glen R. Goebel. (All banner photos courtesy Marie Voisin)**

**Glennie Goebel's grave in France, noting that he was killed only three weeks before the end of World War I. (Courtesy ww1cemeteries.com)**





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- Amanda Melnick Senior Director United Way WRC

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**Wilfred Laschinger, left, and George Rush, both from Wilmot.**

*number of his comrades, a proper burial taking place. A cross was erected over his grave and a number of his fellow runners gathered several bunches of flowers and put them on his grave. Military regulations do not permit me to inform you of his grave location, but if you will write to the "Director of Graves Registration and Enquiries" Winchester House, St. James Square, London, England, this information can be obtained. His personal effects were forwarded through the usual channels and will reach you in due course of time. If there is any other information which you would like, I will gladly furnish it.*

*With deepest Sympathy  
Very sincerely  
No. 195179 C. H. Manley Cpl.  
France, Oct., 12th 1918 (4)*

Glennie was buried in the Hasnon Churchyard in France along with 17 other Canadian soldiers. Glen Goebel Court was named in his honour.

Glennie's older brother, Captain Norman John Goebel, was a civil engineer before he enlisted on May 18, 1918. He served in England with the Canadian Engineers and returned home to his parents in May 1919 and married Rachel Horsman in 1922. He was a graduate of Queen's University and Ripon College, England. He served as the city engineer of Galt from 1947 to 1960 and after retiring, he owned and operated a survey company. He died in Cambridge, Ontario in 1975. Another brother, Walter Goebel, enlisted in April 1918 but was never sent overseas.

Music student Wilfrid C. Laschinger was the son of New Hamburg Postmaster Jacob Laschinger and Sarah Nash who lived at 183 Wilmot Street. On March 6, 1916, he enlisted as a stretcher bearer in Galt at the age of 19. He was 5' 6" tall with a ruddy complexion, brown eyes and black hair. He sailed for England on September 25, 1916 on the S.S. Tuscania. He was on the same ship as his friend, Glennie Goebel. He was transferred to the battle ground in France on November 14, 1916 and served at Vimy



**Wilfred Laschinger's home at 183 Wilmot Street in New Hamburg. (Photo by Marie Voisin)**

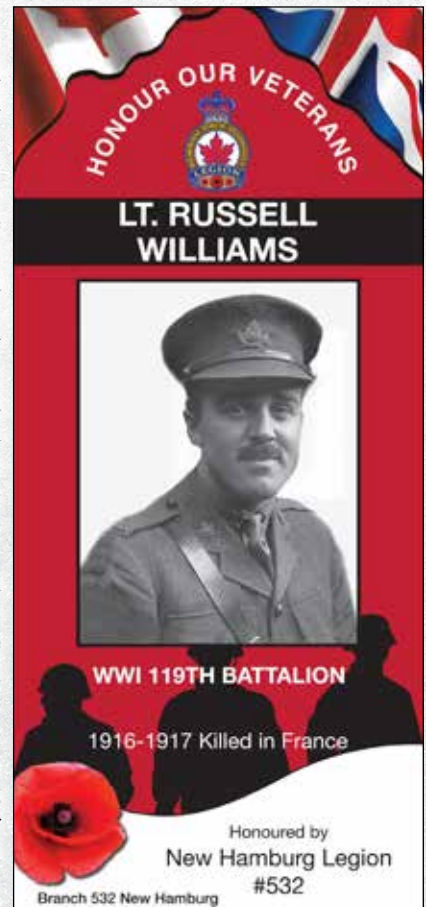
Ridge where he accompanied advancing troops and provided first aid to the wounded.

A month later while at the battle of Fresnoy in France, he was carrying an important message along the line when he was struck by shrapnel and sustained multiple gunshot wounds on his left leg and above and below his left elbow. His left leg was shattered below the knee and was amputated. The next seven months were spent in hospitals in France and England; meanwhile in New Hamburg, his father Jacob passed away.

Wilfrid returned to Canada on November 15, 1917 and was hospitalized in Toronto where he was fitted with an artificial limb. He also resumed his violin studies at University of Toronto Conservatory of Music. He returned to New Hamburg and enjoyed being a civilian for one day when he was taken ill with an abscessed appendix. He was operated on but because his system was weak, he died the following day on April 11, 1918. He is buried in Riverside Cemetery in New Hamburg. Laschinger Boulevard in New Hamburg was named in his honour.

Private Theodore Schuler was the youngest of seven children of John Schuler and Margaret Ludwig. He was a clerk before the war and lived with his parents at 213 Wilmot Street. He often played the piano and sang to accompany silent movies in the Star Theatre located over the mill race (now the CIBC). He enlisted into the armed services in Stratford on August 24, 1915. He was 24, 5' 3" with a dark complexion, brown eyes and dark brown hair. He sailed from Halifax on the S.S. California and arrived in England on November 1, 1915 where he joined the 12th Battalion. On April 16, 1916, he was transferred to France. He had only been in France for three weeks when on June 3, 1916, he was reported missing in action at Zillebeke. It was only his second day in the trenches. He was 27 and was buried at the Menin Gate, Ypres Memorial in France.

New Hamburg born, Lieutenant Russell Williams, son of Daniel S. Williams and Eva Sherk, was a teacher in Wilmot be-

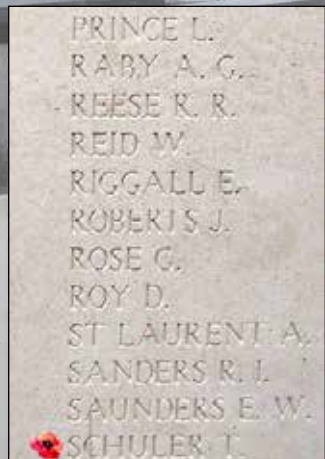


**The banner honouring Lieutenant Russell Williams.**



**Goebel's grave is in a cemetery in Hasnon Churchyard in France, along with 17 other Canadian soldiers. (Courtesy [www.cemeteries.com](http://www.cemeteries.com))**

**A memorial at Menin Gate (Ypres) includes the name of Theodore Schuler. (Courtesy [veterans.gc.ca](http://veterans.gc.ca))**



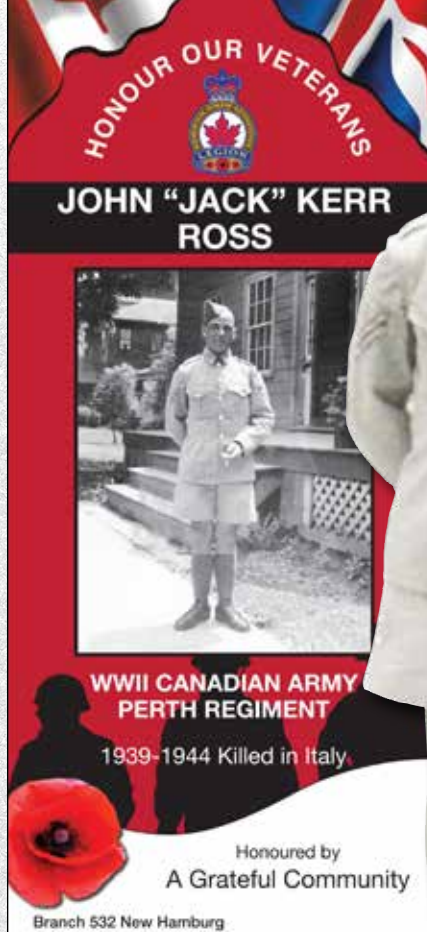


fore he enlisted – he had graduated from the Stratford Normal School in 1911, and had taught school at Wilmot Centre, East Zorra and Baden and for one year was assistant principal of Central School at Galt. At the time of his enlistment, he was attending the University of Toronto and was 5’ 8”, and had brown eyes and hair. He enlisted with the Red Cross of the 111th Battalion on July 27, 1916 and sailed overseas from Halifax in August with a special draft of officers. He had been in the trenches from October 1916 to May 1917 when he was killed instantly by an enemy shell in Fresnoy on May 9, 1917. He was 25 and had splendid prospects for his future. He was buried in Ecoivres Military Cemetery [plot VI. H.27.] at Mont St. Eloi in France. Russell Williams Street in New Hamburg was named in his honour.

**World War II**

During WWII, over 300 soldiers from Wilmot enlisted. Sixteen were killed in action. An estimated 10 million soldiers were killed in WWI; however, over 60 million died in WWII. (5) Four narratives of local soldiers tell their stories during WWII.

John “Jack” Kerr Ross volunteered to serve with the Canadian Army on October 4, 1939. His parents had immigrated to Canada in 1913 from Scotland. Jack was born in 1915 in Niagara Falls. His father, John Ross, was a



Above, The banner honouring Jack Ross.  
 Right, Jack Ross, at ease.  
 (Photo courtesy Harold O’Krafka)

chef and Jack had been working as a farm hand for seven years for Robert Haufchild before the war began. He wanted to be a wheat farmer. Jack had a significant scar on the right side of his forehead, was 5’ 5”, weighed 151 pounds, had a medium complexion, hazel eyes, dark brown hair and was missing a few upper teeth. He first trained in Canada from

The cemetery in Ortano where Jack Ross is buried.  
 (Courtesy cwgc.org)



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1939 until October 19, 1941 when he landed in Liverpool.

He was stationed in England until October 1943 when he was transferred to Italy. He was wounded by a German machine-gunner while clearing the way for his platoon during an advance to Ortona. On January 17, 1944, he died from his wounds after having served for 1,567 days. Warrant Officer II of the Perth Regiment, Jack Ross died at the age of 29 and was buried near the Moro River in Ortano, Italy. (6)

Jack's estate, which was given to his mother, consisted of a comb, nail file in a case, Rouen wrist watch, cap blade, steel mirror, Schaeffer pen & pencil, prayer book, camera, wallet with pictures, identity disc and Victory Loan receipts. John Ross Court in Mannheim was named after him.

Jack's brothers also served in the war: Sgt. Gavin Ross was an artillery instructor at Petawawa; Cpl. James Ross was with a bridge company of the Royal Canadian Army; and Sgt. Tom Ross was a Royal Canadian Air Force gunner on a Canadian bomber and was wounded over a raid on Orleans France. He recovered.

Captain Nile Harold Bier was another local man who fought in WWII. He was one of four children born to Elmer Bier and Laura Seegmiller of 234 Waterloo Street. Nile enlisted in the Cana-

Nile Bier's gravestone near Assisi, Italy.  
(Courtesy.findagrave.com)



dian Army in London, Ontario on June 5, 1942 after he completed his third year of honours business administration at The University of Western Ontario. He took his officer's training at Brockville and Camp Borden and left for overseas with the rank of lieutenant on December 30, 1942.

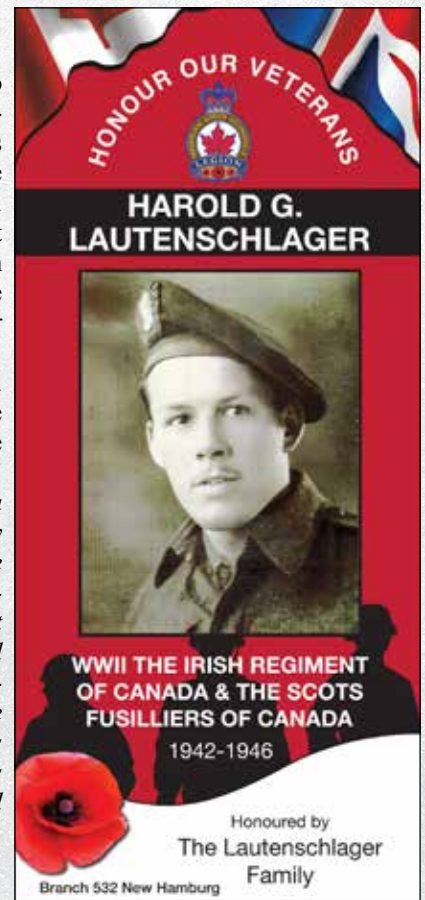
His commander, Major N.A. Dickens of Toronto wrote the following about Nile after Nile was killed in action:

*I don't know just what you could write. If you could only have known the guy it would be easy. He was the best - Maxie was. He was short - about five feet five inches and he had blonde hair. He was a very quiet fellow and very tough and he was an able fellow when this squadron got into trouble. His name was Capt. Nile Bier and he came from New Hamburg, Ontario of German descent. We called him Maxie. Right through Sicily and on up he's been with us, always solid, always in there. We used to see him standing in the turret of his tank with a grenade in his hand, ready for anything. He got killed near Casamaggiore a couple of days ago. The Germans commanded three-quarters of an arc of a circle and Maxie was ambushed by four Mark V Panthers. He saw them and got away a round before they got him. He died giving his gunner a fire order. Two days before he had been wounded, but he came right back up. That was Maxie Bier. (7)*

As stated in the previous paragraph, he was wounded on June 24, 1944 but remained on duty with his unit despite his injuries. He died on June 28, 1944 at the age of 26. He had been previously promoted to the rank of captain for his heroic action in the Battle of Italy. He had seen action in both Sicily and Italy and had been on the front for one year beginning as an officer in the Three Rivers Regiment with the famous 8th Army. Nile is buried in the Assisi War Cemetery near Assisi, Italy. Bier Crescent in New Hamburg was named after him.

Another local man, eighteen-year-old Harold George Lautenschlager, was working at Hahn Brass in April 1942 when he enlisted with the Scots Fusiliers Infantry [Canadian Army]. He lived with his parents at 26 Boulee Street and trained at Camp Borden and Allenburg before going overseas in July 1943. He was sent to North Africa in November 1943.

Two months later, he was sent to Ortano, Italy, and after being on the front lines for a few days, he received a serious head wound. Coincidentally, Harold was injured in Ortano at the same time that another New Hamburg soldier, Jack Kerr Ross was killed. Following a period of convalescence in Africa, Harold returned to Ortano, Italy. His regiment was ambushed in a gully by German soldiers who launched grenades at them. One grenade exploded behind Harold and he was wounded once again - this time in both legs and his left arm. Pieces of the grenade were removed from Harold and he healed. (8) Years after this event, more shrapnel would rise to the surface of his skin and he would have to have them removed. Often, he would cut them out himself.



Harold Lautenschlager's banner.

A promotional graphic for the Wellesley Apple Butter & Cheese Festival. The main element is a large red apple with the text "WELLESLEY APPLE BUTTER & CHEESE FESTIVAL" in white and yellow. Below the apple, there's a smaller image of a festival scene with people and food. The background is a wooden wall.

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In September 1944, he was transferred to the Irish Regiment of Canada and he returned to England in April 1945. Soon after, he was ordered to join the Military Police until he sailed for home in February 1946. Harold married local woman Florence Luft in 1953 and had three children. His older brother, Lieutenant Edward Lautenschlager, also served in England with the Military Police and was awarded the Canadian Efficiency Medal.

Harold returned to civilian life and worked as a plumber for Fred Daniells Plumbing and then for Flood's Plumbing until he retired. He never talked about his years overseas. Like many of his fellow soldiers, it was too painful to remember so he put it in the past. He dedicated the rest of his life to his family and the community. He was one of the founding members of the Royal Canadian Legion 532 in New Hamburg and served as Sargeant at Arms for over 30 years. He also served as the Deputy Chief of the Wilmot Township Fire Department for many years.

Harold ran a tight ship at home and his children stayed out of trouble for that reason. He was a disciplined, no-nonsense guy, tough but fair. He received the Queen's Jubilee Diamond Medal and died in 2014 during his sleep at the age of 91. He was fortunate that he had a life to lead. Three generations of Lautenschlager men served: Thomas Harry served in WWI; his son, Harold in WWII; and Harold's son, Julian served from 1973 and until 2014 in Supply Tech. Julian, who retired as a Warrant Officer,



Cpl. Harold Lautenschlager is pictured at right with Sgt. Trussler and Sgt. Martin. (Photo courtesy Julian Lautenschlager)

drives four hours every Remembrance Day back to New Hamburg to be part of the ceremony where he carries a flag to honour his grandfather and father and other men of their generations.

Another young man, Lorne Kropf, who was the son of locals Norman Kropf and Lorena Betzner, spent his early years at 245

Far left, Banner honouring Lorne Kropf. Left, Flight Lieutenant Lorne Kropf. (Photo courtesy Jamie Kropf)

farmer gave him food and clothing. Over the next five weeks, he was secretly moved by the French underground from Brussels, Paris, St. Jean de Luz, across the Pyrenees mountains, San Sebastian, Madrid until he arrived in English-governed Gibraltar on October 26, 1942.

Lorne was intent on returning to the war but he wanted to become a pilot. He returned to England, was sent back to Canada for pilot training, and then was returned to England. He was granted his wish and by October 1944, he returned to the front as a pilot. After completing his second tour of operations with 20 flights, he became an instructor pilot. He was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross from King George VI at Buckingham Palace.

After the war terminated, Flight Lieutenant Lorne Kropf returned home. He worked for the Dominion Electrohome Industries and married Gladys Schmidt in 1951 and had a daughter. Sadly, Lorne died suddenly of a heart attack in 1966 at the age of 47.

Lorne's brother, Emmett, also served. He enlisted in the Royal Canadian Regiment in July 1940 and served as an infantry instructor at Camp Borden. He requested a transfer to the Royal Canadian Air Force where he trained as an air gunner and was posted overseas in April 1945. Both Lorne and Emmet Kropf were members of New Hamburg's Legion.

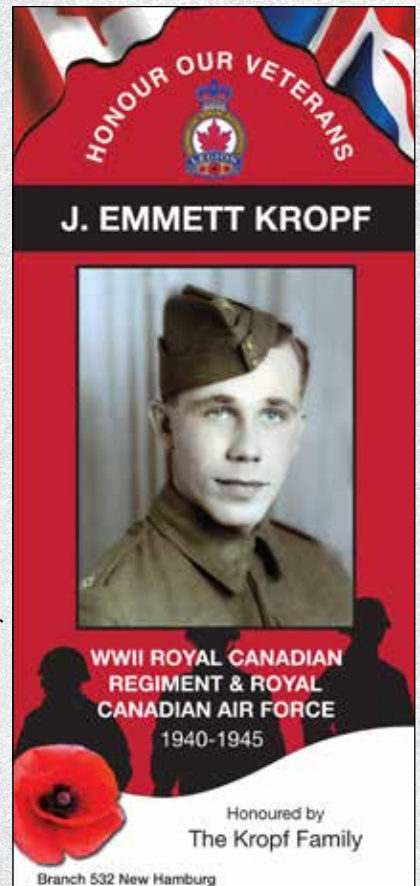
People have asked me why I am so passionate about the Banner Programme – it is because of my dad, Alfred W. Durrer, who served in the Royal

Peel Street in New Hamburg before moving to Kitchener. He enlisted in the Royal Canadian Air force in 1941 and trained as a wireless operator/gunner. He arrived in England in December 1941 and flew in bombing operations over Frankfurt, Essen, Duesenberg and Bremen.

On September 16, 1942, he, along with six crew members, were reported missing on an operational flight over Essen, Germany in a Halifax bomber. Apparently, a German fighter aircraft fired at them and crippled their aircraft. The skipper ordered them to jump but the escape hatch was jammed and the plane went into a downward spiral. At 10,000 feet, the gas tanks exploded and Lorne was somehow pushed through the fuselage.

His parachute opened and he had a hard landing in a field with only a few scratches on his head. He hid for a day and then fortunately, a neighbouring farmer gave him food and clothing. Over the next five weeks, he was secretly moved by the French underground from Brussels, Paris, St. Jean de Luz, across the Pyrenees mountains, San Sebastian, Madrid until he arrived in English-governed Gibraltar on October 26, 1942. Lorne was intent on returning to the war but he wanted to become a pilot. He returned to England, was sent back to Canada for pilot training, and then was returned to England. He was granted his wish and by October 1944, he returned to the front as a pilot. After completing his second tour of operations with 20 flights, he became an instructor pilot. He was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross from King George VI at Buckingham Palace. After the war terminated, Flight Lieutenant Lorne Kropf returned home. He worked for the Dominion Electrohome Industries and married Gladys Schmidt in 1951 and had a daughter. Sadly, Lorne died suddenly of a heart attack in 1966 at the age of 47. Lorne's brother, Emmett, also served. He enlisted in the Royal Canadian Regiment in July 1940 and served as an infantry instructor at Camp Borden. He requested a transfer to the Royal Canadian Air Force where he trained as an air gunner and was posted overseas in April 1945. Both Lorne and Emmet Kropf were members of New Hamburg's Legion. People have asked me why I am so passionate about the Banner Programme – it is because of my dad, Alfred W. Durrer, who served in the Royal

Banner honouring Emmett Kropf.



Canadian Air Force from 1940-1945. He never talked about his war years until he was in his 90s. Almost all the new houses built on our street were occupied by former servicemen, both Canadian and German. My parents' friends were also former soldiers; and then there were my three uncles and three first cousins who served in WWII. They never talked about the war years but they had a definite bond. It is because of all these people who were in my life that I feel compelled to help the banner program become a reality in Wilmot Township.

It has been an honour to work on the Memorial Banner program – to feel the sadness of people when they handed me a photo of their grandfather/father and teared up as they described his life. I cried too. The process of creating and hanging the banners is a commitment for me. It is my personal duty to see that they are completed and hung for all the residents to see. The banners along the streets invite people of all ages to visit and reflect and take photos of their families under them – this was our past and we will not forget these brave individuals. In 2023, we hope to erect another 100 banners.

We spend so little time recognizing the people who fought for our freedom– the



Emmett Kropf trained as an air gunner.  
(Photo courtesy Jamie Kropf)

least we can do is to honour and remember them with banners.

**Footnotes:**

1 Scott Dunstall, "Honouring the Past, Moving into the Future", *Embracing Change*, New Hamburg, November 2022

2 Robert Neubauer, *Sergeant at Arms*, RCL 532 and cohort organizer of the NH Banners.

3 *New Hamburg Independent*, September 14, 1917

4 *The Chronicle Telegraph*, 21 November 21, 1918

5 [www.diffen.com/World\\_War\\_I\\_vs\\_World\\_War\\_II](http://www.diffen.com/World_War_I_vs_World_War_II)

6 The battle for the seaside town of Ortona was one of the most bitter of the war. Ortona was taken after eight days of fierce fighting. The term "mouseholing" has often been used to describe the house-to-house battles. On December 28, having been driven to the town's northern outskirts, the Germans withdrew. In all, the fighting in December cost the 1st Canadian Division over 500 fatal casualties. In January of 1944 the Canadians made further, but limited, advances and then settled into patrolling activities in this sector until March. [Government of Canada: Memorials in Italy]

7 *The Globe & Mail*, July 21, 1944

8 *New Hamburg Independent*, "Hurt Twice, Both Times at Ortano", December 8, 1945



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# Mennonite Churches in Wilmot

## Untangling the Threads

By Fred Lichti

### Anabaptist Sickness

Author Edna Staebler made famous one aspect of Mennonite culture in her “Food That Really Schmecks” cookbooks. Other well-known aspects are quilting, barn raisings, farming, peacemaking, international relief and development work, and the New Hamburg MCC Relief Sale.

But anyone who looks deeper into the Anabaptist-Mennonite story soon discovers another more difficult characteristic – their internal divisions. It’s called “die Täuferkrankheit”, the Anabaptist sickness. Historians coined that phrase centuries ago to describe Mennonites’ tendency to divide over theological and lifestyle issues. In 1693, this fragmentation was at work when the Swiss-South German Mennonites couldn’t agree about the strictness of church discipline and divided, giving birth to the Amish Church. It is still seen in the 33 different kinds of Mennonite and Amish churches in Ontario today, which range from largely assimilated to highly conservative. Let’s consider the groups who are or were once present in Wilmot Township.

Beginning in 1800, Mennonites from Pennsylvania (PM) founded the Grand River settlement (present day Kitchener-Cambridge) on land purchased from the Six Nations. When Wilmot Township was opened for settlement in 1824, the first to claim lots were local Pennsylvania Mennonites and Amish Mennonites (AM) who arrived directly from Europe. All the Mennonite churches in Wilmot today descend from these two strands.

### Churches of Pennsylvania Mennonite heritage

The Mennonites from the Grand River settlement had an organized conference by the time their people began settling in Wilmot Township. Quick to organize rotating services and ordain local leaders, these scattered congregations met initially in homes or schools. Eventually, six meetinghouses were erected and took on the surnames of the owners of the land upon which they stood. In the split of 1889 which birthed the Old Order Mennonite Church, no Old Order congregations were established in Wilmot. However, some tradition minded families relocated to Woolwich Township to remain with the Old Order.

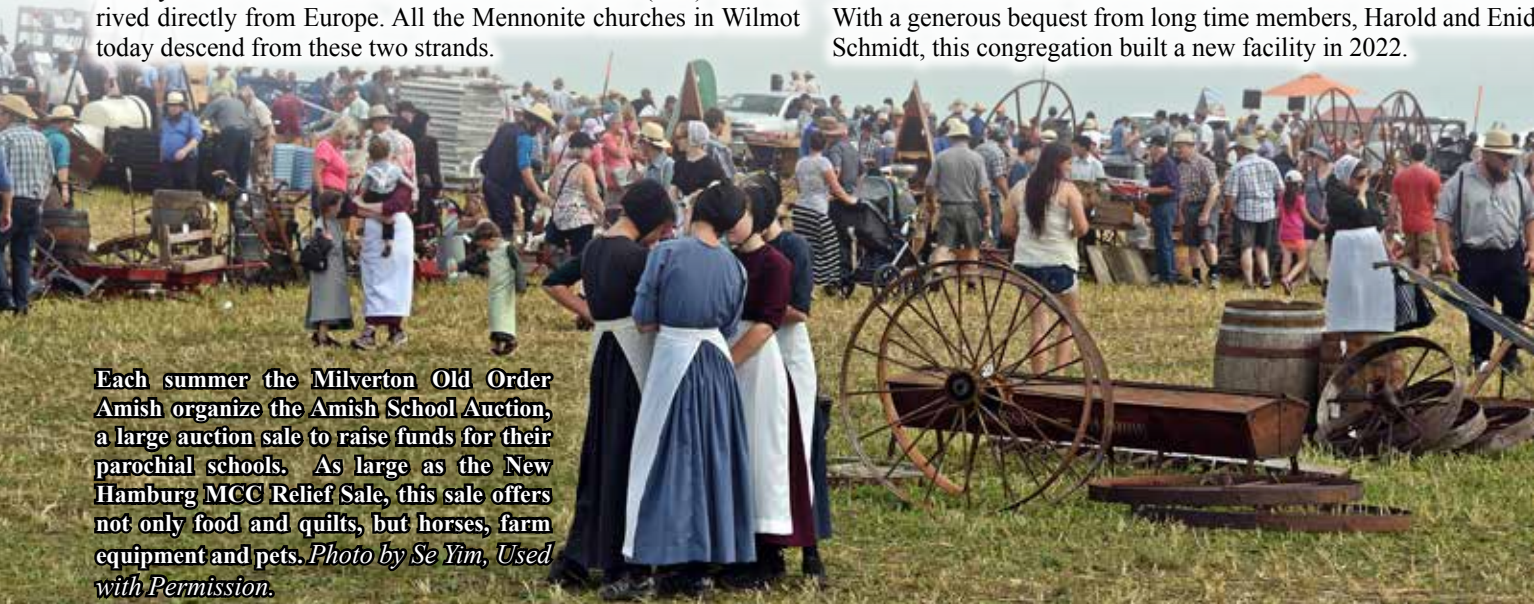
1. Geiger Mennonite Church on Bleams Road near Wilmot Centre was organized in 1831. In 1966, Geiger Mennonite merged with Baden Mennonite to become Wilmot Mennonite Church. Their new facility was constructed in 1977.

2. Mannheim Mennonite Church, originally called Latschar, was organized in 1832. In 1980, the church building was moved up the hill and attached to an existing schoolhouse.

3. Blenheim Mennonite Church near New Dundee was founded in 1839; the congregation built their first meetinghouse in 1850. Because of dwindling membership, Blenheim merged with the nearby Beihn congregation in 1975 and repurposed their building as a retreat centre.

4. Shantz Mennonite Church on Erbs Road was founded in 1840. With a generous bequest from long time members, Harold and Enid Schmidt, this congregation built a new facility in 2022.

Each summer the Milverton Old Order Amish organize the Amish School Auction, a large auction sale to raise funds for their parochial schools. As large as the New Hamburg MCC Relief Sale, this sale offers not only food and quilts, but horses, farm equipment and pets. Photo by Se Yim, Used with Permission.



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This 1857 Georgian-style farmhouse was built with a movable wall that was opened when hosting the Amish congregation for worship. Designated a Heritage Property by Wilmot Township, the farm is located on Snyder's Road, just west of Baden and owned by Ralph and Caroline Wagler. Photo from Wilmot Heritage. Used with Permission.

5. Beihn Mennonite Church South of New Hamburg was founded in 1865. The first meetinghouse was occupied in 1870 and a new structure erected in 1964. It was renamed Nith Valley Mennonite Church after a merger with the Blenheim congregation.

6. Baden Mennonite Church at the west end of town was founded in 1913 by Amishman Peter Moyer as an attempt to bring together the Amish and Mennonites. This congregation merged with Geiger in 1966 to form Wilmot Mennonite. A fire destroyed the Baden building in 2000.

7. Blenheim Ecumenical Church was created in 2003 out of a division within the Kitchener-Waterloo House Churches. The Blenheim church has been their home.

The above congregations are members of the Mennonite Church of Eastern Canada (MCEC). After the split of 1959 (see 9 below), their assimilation with mainstream society accelerated.

8. Bethel Evangelical Missionary Church in New Dundee began in 1855 as a preaching appointment under the Ontario Mennonite Conference. They sided with the evangelically minded, liberal Mennonites of the 19th century and took on the name, Mennonite Brethren in Christ (1883-1947). In the last century Bethel participated in several mergers and adopted different names-United Missionary Church, Missionary Church and since 1993, the Evangelical Missionary Church.

9. New Hamburg Conservative Mennonite Church on Hamilton Road was founded in 1959 as a result of a division in the Mennonite Conference of Ontario. Irreconcilable differences about how to interpret the Bible and define faithfulness prompted pastoral leaders from the Baden, Geiger and Beihn congregations to found this congregation and organize like-minded Mennonites elsewhere. In



The Jantzi family homestead at 1157 Settlement Road was built about 1855. The Old Order Amish congregation continued to meet in this house after the 1886 meetinghouse division. The first bishop of the OOA in Canada, Peter G. Jantzi (1842-1917), lived here all his life and is buried in the Amish Settlement Cemetery next door.

Left, Raised in an Amish family, John G. Honderich (1825-1907) was an early convert to the Reformed Mennonites. Ordained in 1860, he served as a Minister for the Reformed Mennonite Churches in Wilmot, Kingwood and North Easthope. Buried in the Reformed Mennonite Cemetery on Christner Road, his tombstone reads, "Ordained to the Ministry 1860. The First Male Child Born in Wilmot Township". Photo by F. Lichti



Steinmann Church Headstone. Built in 1946, the headstone on the Steinmann Mennonite Church includes "A M" for Amish Mennonite. Little else about the building indicated the congregation's humble origins. Photo by Bruce Schumm. Used with Permission.

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1960, they built a church. This congregation has male pastors, certain dress expectations, sings a cappella and is not as ecumenically minded as some. Originally, a founding member of the Conservative Mennonite Church of Ontario, they withdrew about 1993 to become an unaffiliated congregation.

10. Grace Mennonite Fellowship was formed in 1976 when some members from the New Hamburg Conservative Church withdrew through a desire for more congregational autonomy, less focus on rules and regulations, and more open fellowship with other conservative-minded groups. They met in the vacant Bethel United Church south of New Hamburg and bought the building in 1984. In 1985 and 2006 they made additions to their building. This congregation has male pastors, certain dress expectations and sings a cappella. Grace is a member of the Mid-West Fellowship, an association of like minded conservative Mennonites from Ontario and the American mid-west.

11. Oasis Mennonite Church started in 2019 due to crowding at Grace. This congregation has male pastors, certain dress expectations and sings a cappella. Oasis is a member of the Mid-West Fellowship. They currently meet in the Baden Lutheran Church.

#### Churches of Amish Mennonite heritage.

After the Amish land scout, Christian Nafziger, negotiated a land deal with Upper Canada in 1822, Amish Mennonite families from German speaking Europe came to Wilmot from 1823-1860.

1. Steinmann Mennonite Church descends from the first Amish Mennonite congregation organized in Canada in 1824. For the first 60 years, Wilmot's Amish worshipped in their homes and barns. In 1885, they built a Mennonite styled meeting house at the corner of Snyders Rd. and Nafziger Rd., site of the current Steinmann Church. Steinmann has been the largest of the Mennonite congregations in the area and replaced their original frame meetinghouse with a large, brick church in 1946. In 1975 and 2007 they undertook major additions to their facility.

2. St. Agatha Mennonite and Steinmann church operated as one congregation meeting in two locations until their amicable separation in 1957. The St. Agatha meetinghouse was built in 1886 on land which had earlier been donated for a school and a cemetery.



Each summer the Milverton Old Order Amish organize the Amish School Auction, a large auction sale to raise funds for their parochial schools. Photo by Se Yim, Used with Permission.

3. The Reformed Mennonite Church began in Pennsylvania in 1812 under the leadership of John Herr. When Reformed Mennonite preachers came into Wilmot in the 1840s, their message of new birth and purity of life was well received by some Amish who were troubled by the prevalence of alcohol and tobacco use and the lack of discipline in their own church. With converts from the Amish and others, the Wilmot Reformed Mennonite Church was organized in 1844. In 1860, they erected a meetinghouse and

cemetery on Christner Rd. known as Hostetler's. Due to dwindling membership, the building was removed and members shifted to the North Easthope Reformed Mennonite Church on Perth Line 43, east of Amulree. This congregation has male pastors, certain dress expectations and is not ecumenical.

4. Old Order Amish. When Amish Mennonites began building meetinghouses in the 1880s, the tradition-minded families chose to continue worshipping in homes and formed the Wellesley Old Order Amish Church (OOA). Some families from that first generation lived in Wilmot, including their first bishop, Peter G. Jantzi. Throughout the 20th century, the OOA families moved out of Wilmot and into Wellesley and Mornington Townships. Today they are concentrated in the Milverton-Millbank area where there are 11 congregations.

OOA use horse and buggies, speak Pennsylvania German (often incorrectly known as "Pennsylvania Dutch"), send their children to parochial schools and meet in their homes and shops for worship. They have male pastors, wear plain attire and are not ecumenical. Because of large families and a high rate of retention, their population nearly doubles every 20 years. In Canada and the US combined there were more than 373,000 Old Orders in 2022 and their total baptized membership already surpasses the total number of baptized assimilated Mennonites.

5. Hillcrest Mennonite Church was founded in 1964 as a church plant from the overcrowded East Zorra Church near Tavistock. It is located just west of New Hamburg on Bleams Rd. Hillcrest did a major renovation in 1990.

6. Living Water Christian Fellowship was launched in 1980 by families whose roots were in other MCEC congregations, predom-



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**Members of Cedar Grove Amish Mennonite Church gather to sort and re-package soap for shipment overseas. Some years they ship 35 tons of soap. Photo by Marion Roes. Used with Permission.**

inantly, the Steinmann Church. Their vision was to be an “alternative” congregation that allowed for greater variety in worship and the expression of charismatic gifts. They erected a building on Hincks St. in New Hamburg in 1983. In 2020, this congregation withdrew from MCEC over recent theological directions and affiliated with the global, non-denominational, charismatic Catch the Fire organization.

7. West Hills Mennonite Fellowship was birthed in 1991 by a group of mission minded persons, primarily from the Steinmann Mennonite Church. The congregation currently worships in the Haysville Community Centre.

**Mennonite Church of Eastern Canada**

Except for the OOA, Reformed Mennonite and Living Water, the above congregations of Amish heritage are today members of MCEC. The first generations of Amish who settled Wilmot followed a highly traditional faith and lifestyle. However, the building of meetinghouses in the 1880s didn’t only represent their desire for a more convenient place to worship, but signalled a new openness to change and technology. Wilmot’s Amish Mennonites, like their Pennsylvania Mennonite neighbours, began a journey of assimilation. The advent of Sunday School in the early 20th century and the shift to English before W.W. II, accelerated assimilation. Generation after generation dropped bits and pieces of the Amish tradition and in 1963, they dropped the term Amish from their name and became the Western Ontario Mennonite Conference. In 1988, the Western Ontario Conference (AM) merged with the Ontario Mennonite Conference (PM) and the United Mennonite Conference (Russian Mennonite) to create the Mennonite Church of Eastern Canada.

MCEC congregations hold weekly worship services, engage in mission and service activities, welcome diversity and are ecumenically minded. Although all MCEC congregations use instruments in their worship, some congregations occasionally sing a cappella. They all have salaried pastors and accept male and female leadership. Based on their appearance or use of technologies, most MCEC Mennonites are indistinguishable from mainstream society. In recent decades, MCEC has become an increasingly multicultural church body. New congregations have roots in many areas in the

world – Ethiopia, Myanmar, Colombia, Laos, Sri Lanka, El Salvador, China and more.

**Refugee Congregations.**

1. The New Hamburg Russian Mennonite Church was comprised of refugees who fled Ukraine during the anarchy and suffering caused by the Russian Revolution. These refugees found welcome among the Mennonites and Amish of Wilmot and surrounding the townships. Some found employment at the Hahn Brass and Felt Boot Factories in New Hamburg and settled here. A church was formed in 1926 (or 1929) which met above the current Short Stop on Peel Street in New Hamburg, then called the Geiger Grocery Store. As for many immigrant congregations, this church served as both a faith and cultural community. After most of the members moved to KW, Niagara or Toronto, the church was closed in 1952.

2. The Hmong Church. Because of the Vietnam War, many Hmong people from Laos became refugees in Thailand. Some of these refugees immigrated to Canada in 1979 and were sponsored by local churches. In 1980 seven Hmong Christian families began worship services at the Grandview Public School in New Hamburg, assisted by the Steinmann Church. In 1981 the Hmong Congregation chose to identify as Mennonite and relocated to First Mennonite Church in Kitchener. Since 1996 this congregation has occupied its own church building on Doon Road in Kitchener and is a member of MCEC.

**In North Wilmot**

The Cedar Grove Amish Mennonite Church is located just north of Wellesley but their “Recycling Division” is on the property of their former parochial school at the intersection of Nafziger and Berlett’s Roads. Here in a large warehouse they collect, repackage and distribute new and used soap from motels and institutions. The soap is shipped to needy people around the world.

David Martin Mennonites are a branch of Old Orders who separated themselves from the main Old Order Mennonite group more than a century ago. In recent years, they are showing up in Wilmot to sell their farm produce from the backs of their buggies. Wherever Old Orders have settled, on-farm industries spring up (e.g. saw mills, furniture, metal fabrication, welding shops etc.). Although David

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Martin Mennonites have settled throughout Wellesley Township, they are not likely to move into Wilmot. In comparison to Wellesley, Wilmot's bylaws on agriculturally zoned land do not permit the same scale and size of on-farm industry which they seek.

**When Do Different Mennonite Groups Work Together?**

Mennonite groups most readily come together in the cause of mutual aid or to help the needy. Never calling itself an insurance company, the Amish Mennonite Fire and Storm Aid Union has been providing mutual aid to members of Amish Mennonite heritage since 1872. A great variety of Mennonite and Amish congregations work together to support the efforts of the Mennonite Central Committee in their relief, service and development programs around the world. Other examples are the New Hamburg MCC Relief Sale and the MCC Thrift Shop in New Hamburg.

However, co-operation has its limits. With the growing attention that MCC paid to political issues at home and abroad, the more conservative churches quietly withdrew and organized an alternative, Christian Aid Ministries. CAM was organized in 1981 "to provide a trustworthy, efficient channel for Amish and Conservative Mennonite churches and individuals to minister to physical and spiritual needs around the world". Their Canadian office and material aid warehouse is in Moorefield, Ontario.

**Conclusion**

Excepting for the Russian Mennonite and Hmong, all of the Mennonite churches in Wilmot can be categorized as of Pennsylvania Mennonite or Amish Mennonite heritage. Nonetheless, they have all welcomed and continue to welcome people from other traditions or no religious background. To learn more about their unique stories, read their congregational histories, check out their on-line presence or make personal contact.


It's a paradox that a religious tradition which emphasizes Jesus' teachings on peacemaking is prone to resolving internal conflicts

by splitting into separate groups. Part of the reason lies in the fact that Mennonites are conflict avoidant, egalitarian, highly congregational, committed to personal convictions and they have no Pope to make final rulings. It really comes down to your interpretation of the Bible and understandings of faithfulness.

The tangled threads of Mennonite and Amish church history weave a complicated story. Like other religious traditions, the faith and culture of Mennonites offer blessings as well as challenges. Like people, all churches have their unique personalities and idiosyncrasies but embedded in each is a story of divine grace woven through human frailty and faithfulness.

**A map of the Mennonite churches and facilities in Wilmot township.**







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Ron Waples

IS A HARNESS RACING CHAMPION, MANY TIMES OVER

Ron Waples at his bar, which was constructed of wood from a demolished barn from the Woodbine raceway. (Photos by Paul Knowles)

*By Paul Knowles*

Ron Waples says he got involved in harness racing because “I had to do something – I couldn’t play hockey.” And that’s the kind of tongue-in-cheek, humorous response you are likely to get from Ron, who happens to be one of the top harness racing drivers of all time.

The truth is, Ron was raised on a farm, but disliked everything about farming... except the animals. So at the age of 15, he left home to work for his cousins, Keith and Murray Waples, who were deeply involved in raising and racing Standardbred horses.

For the uninitiated, harness racing is the brand of racing where the driver sits in a cart known as a sulky, pulled by the horse.

Ron fell in love with the horses, and with the business in general. He started working in the stables, working his way up to a groom and then a trainer, and, at age 22, he participated in his first race as a driver.

“The rest,” he says, “is history.”

It certainly is. Ron went on to win over 7,000 races, with winnings of over \$100 million dollars. He laughs when asked if he kept all that money – the usual payout for the driver was 5% of the winnings. He also laughs, noting that while he won 7,000 races, he “got beat about 55,000 times.” That may be a slight exaggeration – but not by much. He estimates that he has raced “50,000 times.”

He’s a member of four Halls of Fame – the Canadian Sports Hall of Fame, the Canadian Horse Racing Hall of Fame, the Harness Racing Hall of Fame at Goshen, New York, and the Little Brown Jug Wall of Fame.

Today, Ron says his driving days are over. He divides his time between the home he shares with his wife (and fellow horse trainer) Liz, in Foxboro Green in Wilmot township, and their RV, which they take to the Orlando area in Florida for the cold months.

Born in 1944, he raced from the mid-60s until last year, donning

the colours twice in 2022 at the behest of his son. He drove in Legends Day at Clinton, and then was persuaded to race just once more – a race in the Kawarthas that he won! He smiles when he says that it felt really good to go out on a winning note.

Ron actually has two sons – Randy and Ronnie – involved in Standardbred racing, and two more children. Randy does TV commentary for Woodbine Raceway; Ronnie is a trainer. His only daughter is studying to be a doctor, and is currently interning in the US.

The basement in Ron and Liz’s home is filled with memorabilia from his long and successful career. There are photos of horses, of horse racing, bits of equipment, and trophies. He’s won so many trophies that the couple decided to donate some of them to kids’ organizations.

There is also a bar – but not just any bar. Ron had his personal bar built from wood taken from a demolished barn from the iconic Woodbine Raceway.

Ron is a student of the history of his sport, and he finds it intriguing that he now lives in the community once famous for one of the most well-attended Standardbred races ever – Derby Days, held in New Hamburg from 1936 through 1957. He didn’t start racing, himself, until a decade later, but recently visited Norm Hill Park in New Hamburg to see the stone marking the grave of the most famous horse to race in Derby Day races – “The Count B”. The first driver of The Count B happened to be a long-time friend of Ron’s – Cliff “Chappie” Chapman, of Tillsonburg, who became publisher of a magazine that was the harness racing Bible, “The Canadian Sportsman”. Chapman passed away in 2003.

As the winner of over 7,000 races, as well as the owner, part owner, and/or trainer of even more winners, it might be hard for Ron to pick out any particular highlights of his lengthy career. But he does: “One week in 1983, I won two, million-dollar races in a week.” He was the first driver to accomplish that. The first race

was won by a horse named Ralph Hanover; the second, by Shannon's Fancy.

He's had a lot of great horses – and the man clearly loves horses – but Ralph Hanover holds some special memories. Ron owned the horse, and drove him – and won the harness racing triple crown with the horse. Ralph Hanover was syndicated for \$5 million as a three-year-old; Ron laughs, and points out “I don't have all that, either!”

Ron raced in five different countries, including almost every Canadian province and a lengthy list of American states. He lived in New Jersey for 10 years. Over the years, he says, “At one time or another, we owned pieces and parts of 125 horses.”

As noted, he has given up driving, but still gets called on to help train. He says he doesn't look for work, but sometimes, work looks for him. He and Liz currently own a share of a three-year-old filly based in Florida. In the winter months, Liz looks after that horse, and Ron says proudly that in five starts this year, their horse has earned \$32,000 – “so she's paying her way.”

Ron says he doesn't regret retiring from driving. “You have to know when it's time to quit,” he says, admitting that he still follows the sport. “I love the young horses,” he says, “I love June every year when the two-year-olds

start to race.” And he enjoys following the younger drivers, because “I know how they feel, because I've been there.”

However, he doesn't bet on the races, and frankly can't remember the last time he did. Even though the industry has changed – in-person crowds are down, but on-line betting is booming, and that makes for bigger income and bigger purses. He says that if he noticed a horse he liked, he might bet twenty bucks... but that hasn't actually happened for a very long time.

Ron says that if a young person asked him if they should get involved in the industry, he would warn them that it is not a guaranteed road to being “rich and famous... it's a very tough game, with long hard house.” But if they love horses, go for it. “It's the love of the animals that will keep you there.”

Although he talks with great affection about the business that gave him a good, and adventurous, living for many decades, Ron admits that harness racing is “very, very competitive.” I ask if that reaches the level of “nasty.” “It the race, it can be,” he says. “When that gate goes up, you have no friends.” But when he's not wearing colours and seated in a sulky, it's pretty clear that Ron has all the friends he can handle! And some of them may have four feet and hooves.



A tiny sample of Ron's memorabilia – the painting shows Ron, in the blue and white colours, in a race that, highly unusually, finished in a dead heat.



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# THE TURNING POINT IN HAYSVILLE'S HISTORY

A bucolic scene – the Nith River as seen from the Huron Road in the heart of Haysville. (Paul Knowles photo)

**By Rod Charles**

Sometimes, the ability of a community to thrive comes down to luck.

This was certainly the case with Haysville, a village in Wilmot Township in Waterloo Region. According to the book “History of Hamburg”, Haysville was a scrappy village with a promising future. Between 1832 - 1836 several pioneers came into the district with their families, including James Gordon Smith, Henry Pudicombe and Robert Hays, who owned a sawmill.

With a growing population came new opportunities and for Haysville the sky seemed to be the limit. The first post office in the township, built in 1837, was at Haysville and the village had a hall and a church. Four-horse stage coaches carrying passengers and mail slowly made the village into a transpor-

tion hub, turning the local stable into a thriving business that could accommodate 125 horses. The population ballooned to 500 with the stimulus of a flour and woolen mill, supplied with power from the north river.

Then without warning a string of disastrous events hit the community. A series of fires and floods crippled some of the businesses over the years, but the biggest piece of bad luck hit the area when Grand Trunk Railway surveyors elected to pass the village in 1856 and go through New Hamburg instead, sidetracking Haysville and severely hampering the community’s ability to grow.

**Building Infrastructure without a Crystal Ball**

Today, Haysville is a quiet community at Huron and Tye Road

The entrance to the village today, on the Huron Road, once the most important road – and stagecoach route – in the area. (Paul Knowles photo)



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on the Nith River. Looking at the village on Google Maps is a perfect way to see firsthand how one infrastructure decision impacted a community.

What's even more interesting is that the city of Stratford, Ontario might have been the beneficiary of a little 'Kokura Luck' at Haysville's expense. The original plan had called for the rail to bypass the then tiny village of Stratford. Imagine the impact that decision would have had on the city that we know and love today with its award-winning restaurants, gorgeous parks, world-famous Stratford Theatre and of course, Justin Bieber.

The surveyors who decided that Haysville would lose their rail hub and that Stratford would keep theirs had no idea of the impact their decision would have on the future or what future events would impact Wilmot Township and the province of Ontario. The Stratford Theatre was built in 1957. The 401 (Macdonald-Cartier Freeway) Highway would not be built until December 1947. Kitchener was still known as Berlin before changing its name in 1916 due to anger over The First World War. None of these events were known to the surveyors who made the decision with regards to Haysville. The same is true when it comes to city and provincial infrastructure projects today.

Ken Greenberg is an urban designer, teacher, writer, former Director of Urban Design and Architecture for the City of Toronto, and Principal of Greenberg Consultants. He is the recipient of the 2010 American Institute of Architects Thomas Jefferson Award for Public Design Excellence and the 2014 Sustainable Buildings Canada Lifetime Achievement Award and was selected as a Member of the Order



Building the railroad through Wilmot township... but bypassing Haysville.

of Canada in 2020.

He says while a lot of thought goes into urban development, nobody can see into the future. Building a highway bypass that goes around a small city or town can shorten the drive from one point to another, but it can have the effect of basically sucking the lifeblood out of a traditional main street if everyone just bypasses the town. While it may not make sense today, it may have made sense at the time.

"It's a really interesting point to start from Haysville and the decision not to put a stop on the rail there," says Greenberg. "There was

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a time when we were not seeing passenger rail as being particularly significant in Canada, and we either eliminated stops like Haysville or we put them outside of their respective cities. Ottawa would be a good example where instead of having the railway station right opposite Parliament Hill, right in the heart of the city, it's now quite inconvenient to take a train. It has to do with certain moments in time and how we think people are going to move around, and how we prioritize locations and decisions."

Greenberg also said sometimes the right decision is made without a true understanding of how important the improvement will be in the future.

"Sometimes a community may go through a period of time when a rail hub is not as heavily used, and then over time they come back very, very strongly and become important. Toronto's Union Station is a perfect example of this. It's right downtown and it's now wired into Via Rail, the Go Train, and direct service into the subway. It's now a major transportation hub for the entire region."

Greenberg explained that despite all the benefits of technology and history it can still be difficult to get it right. He pointed to the example of the Ontario Government that is seemingly doing two very contradictory things at the same time.

On one hand, there's billions of dollars in investment in new transit infrastructure. This includes the new Ontario 15.6-kilometre subway line that will run from Exhibition Place, through the heart of downtown to the Ontario Science Centre and bring 15 new stations to the city.

At the same time, the government is proposing to build the new 400 series Highway 413, which Greenberg says will inevitably have the effect of extending sprawl and making people more car dependent. He also spoke about the ongoing debate to move the Ontario Science Centre downtown following the decision to build the Ontario Line out to its current location.

In short, when it comes to trying to do the correct thing with infrastructure and major projects, it can still be a guessing game despite the best intentions. That was true for the surveyors who chose not to build a rail station in Haysville and it's also true for the urban designers who chose to build a rail station next to the Ontario Science Centre, and then debate moving the Ontario Science Centre.

### Bigger Isn't Necessarily Better

It may seem like Haysville got the short end of the stick. There are no chain restaurants, Cineplex Theatres, high schools or concert stages.

At first glance, it appears the only true attraction Haysville has going for it are green fields and dirt roads.

But Hannie Van Bergeijk, proud owner of Mountainoak Cheese, would beg to differ.

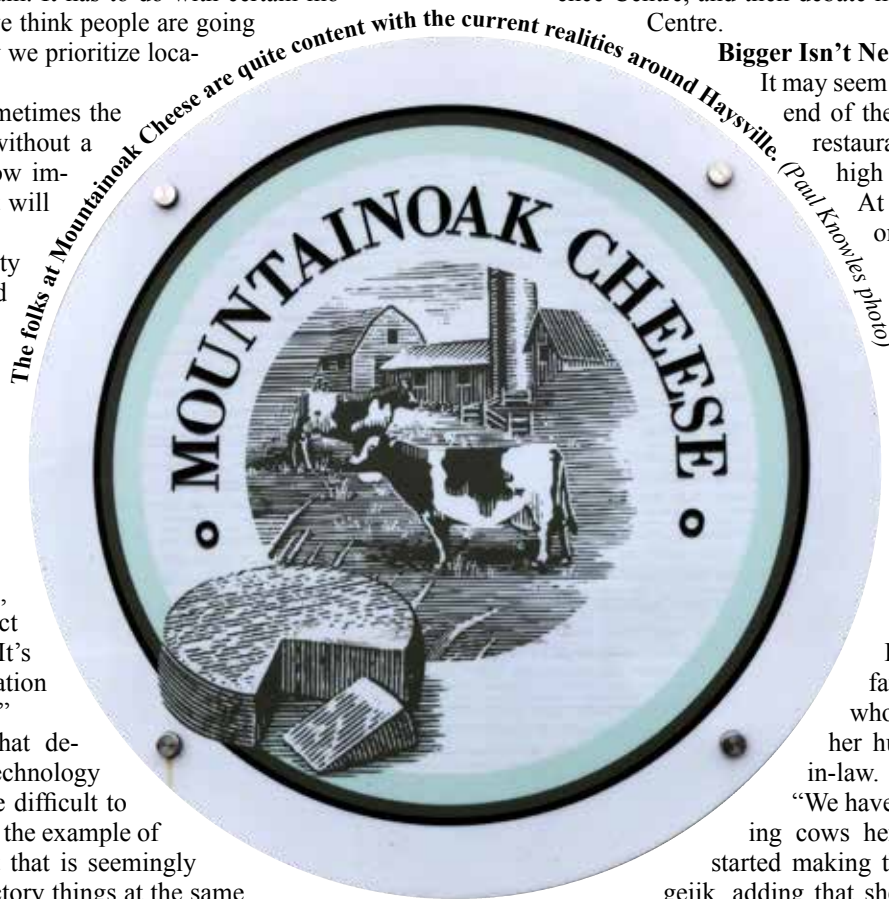
"It was 27 years ago that we found this farm, we liked the surroundings here, we liked the glowing fields and the good soil. That's why we immigrated here from Holland and started our farm," said Van Bergeijk, who runs her business with her husband, son and daughter-in-law.

"We have a dairy farm, started milking cows here and 15 years later we started making the cheese," said Van Bergeijk, adding that she considered herself lucky to live in Haysville. "Another reason we like Haysville

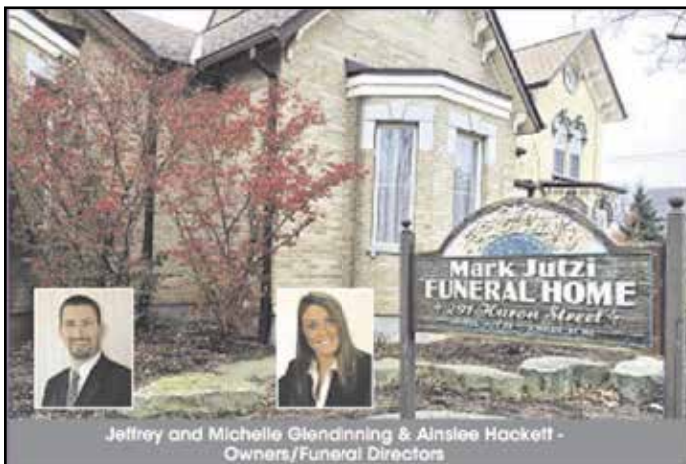
is it's very central to everything. It's close to Kitchener, close to Stratford, not too far away from Oxford and Woodstock. It's such a nice community and such nice people live in Haysville."

It seems when all is said and done Haysville didn't make out too badly. Maybe it isn't just urban planning and provincial projects that makes a community successful. Perhaps in the end the key ingredient to a thriving rural or urban centre is and always has been hard working, disciplined, positive and grateful people like Mrs. Van Bergeijk.

This is undoubtedly true. But history has shown that a little bit of 'luck' doesn't hurt either.



The folks at Mountainoak Cheese are quite content with the current realities around Haysville. (Paul Knowles photo)



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# CHANGES COMMON IN LOCAL

# church history

*By Paul Knowles*

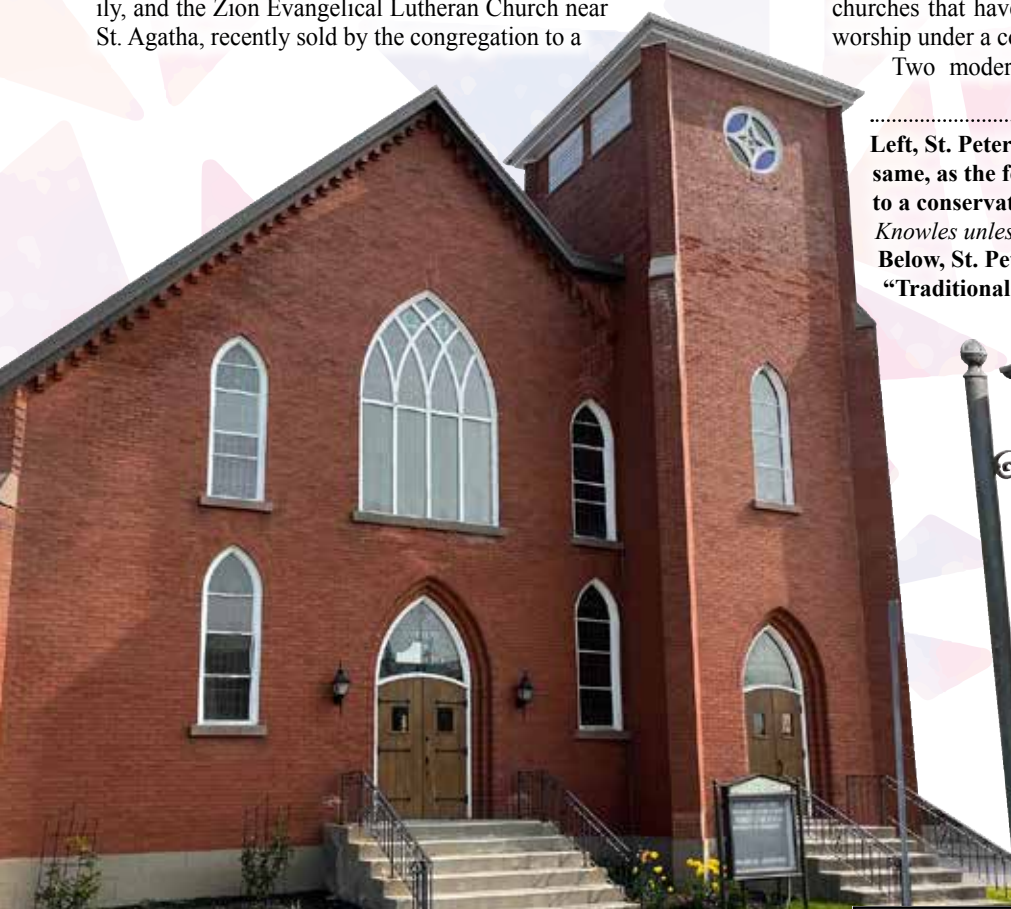
A number of the most significant historic buildings in Wilmot township and the area are churches – or were at one time. There are a few such buildings that have been deconsecrated – no longer identified as a sacred space – and are now used for other purposes. Some have become homes. Two recent examples, with future use as yet undetermined, are Livingston Presbyterian Church in Baden, now owned by a Baden family, and the Zion Evangelical Lutheran Church near St. Agatha, recently sold by the congregation to a

private owner.

Once upon a time, there were three Anglican churches within a few kilometers of each other. The church in Haysville is now a home; St. James, on the Huron Road, is now a “Chapel of Ease”, where the cemetery is still in use, and the church has a couple of services a year, organized by its parent church, St. George’s Anglican in New Hamburg.

Perhaps the most interesting, from a historical perspective, are area churches that have changed affiliations, and now operate as places of worship under a completely new name.

Two modern examples are the Fellowship Bible Church on



Left, St. Peter’s in New Hamburg – only the name remains the same, as the former Evangelical Lutheran Church is now home to a conservative Catholic Congregation. (All photos by Paul Knowles unless otherwise credited)

Below, St. Peter’s Catholic Church worship today features “Traditional Catholic Mass.”




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Above, This stained glass window, honouring the memory of Laura Louise Livingston, daughter of Castle Kilbride founder James Livingston, is in Livingston Presbyterian Church in Baden – now no longer a church, and privately owned. Its future use is not yet determined.

(Copyright Castle Kilbride)

Right, Once a Baptist church, now named New Hamburg Christian Centre, the Jacob Street church is affiliated with the Pentecostal Assemblies of Canada.



Hamilton Road in New Hamburg, once but no longer part of a larger denomination called the Fellowship of Evangelical Baptist Churches, and, as outlined in the article by Fred Lichti in this magazine, Living Water Christian Fellowship, which withdrew from the Mennonite denomination “MCEC” in 2020, joining the global, non-denominational, charismatic Catch the Fire organization.

There are also at least three historic churches in New Hamburg that have undergone significant changes during their history.

The imposing red brick building now known as St. Peter’s Catholic Church, on Huron Street in New Hamburg, is today home to a congregation quite different in its beliefs and practices, compared to the folks who came to the building on Sundays when it was known as St. Peter’s Lutheran Church, built in 1915 as an Evangelical Lutheran church. After just over a century, the shrinking congregation sold the building to the Society of Saint Pius X, a highly conservative Catholic group, which continues to meet there today. Only the name – St. Peter’s – has not undergone significant change.

A few years prior to the construction of St. Peter’s – which, by the way, had an imposing steeple in its earlier days – the local Baptist congregation erected a church. The building, on Jacob Street, is today home to the New Hamburg Christian Centre, a congregation affiliated with the Pentecostal Assemblies of Canada.

One of the first Christian congregations to take shape in New Hamburg was known as the Evangelical Church, also called German Methodists. Today the church is known as Zion United, part of the United Church of Canada.



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A historic plaque in Waterloo reads, “In August, 1839, a camp meeting was held in this vicinity by Bishop Joseph Seybert and five preachers, which resulted in the formation of Upper Canada’s first Evangelical

Church congregation. This church and the United Brethren in Christ had been founded in Pennsylvania about 1800 by German-speaking settlers. In 1836 missionaries from the Evangelical Church had preached in the Niagara Peninsula and in this region. Their first church in Canada was opened in 1841 at Berlin (Kitchener), and in 1864 a separate Canada Conference was established. In later years congregations were formed throughout Ontario and Western Canada, and in 1946 the Evangelical Church joined with the United Brethren to form the Evangelical United Brethren.”

The New Hamburg congregation may pre-date some of these figures – church records indicate the congregation existed in 1839, and perhaps even earlier.

As a result of a quite contentious debate, in 1968, the EUB denomination voted to merge with the United Church of Canada. Most EUB churches – including New Hamburg’s Zion – made the change, but a few – including the congregation now known as Wilmot Centre Missionary Church – opted out of the merger, joining a more evangelical group, today known as the Evangelical Missionary Church of Canada. That decision resulted in an awkward situation – both the United Church and the Missionary Church assigned a minister to the congregation. The story goes that the United Church pastor sat in the back of the congregation every Sunday while his opposite number conducted the services.

Several decades after the controversy, the congregation actually held a service of reconciliation between the two denominations.

Above, The signs that front Zion United tell the story – the old, and the new, written in stone and Plexiglass!

Bottom right, Zion United, once an “Evangelical” or “German Methodist” church, became part of the United Church of Canada in 1968.



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