

Toronto Sketches 9

Toronto Sketches



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TORONTO

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Mike Filey's column "The Way We Were" has appeared in the *Toronto Sunday Sun* on a regular basis since 1975. Many of his earlier columns have been reproduced in volumes 1 through 8 of Dundur Press's Toronto Sketches series. The columns in this book originally appeared in 2003 and 2004. Appended to each column is the date it first appeared as well as any relevant material that may have surfaced since that date (indicated by an asterisk).

The New Old Toronto Street

One of the most historic streets in Toronto is little Toronto Street. It's only one block long, if you don't count the intersection it makes on the east side with Court Street, another small thoroughfare that also has some interesting history. To further define the limits of the present-day Toronto Street, it connects King Street to the south with Adelaide to the north. Notice that I used the expression "the present-day Toronto Street," since what we have today is not the Toronto Street originally laid out by a few pioneer surveyors back in the late 1700s.

Historically, today's Toronto Street is, in relative terms, a rather recent addition that came into being sometime after 1830. Dr. Scadding in his book *Toronto of Old* identifies the original Toronto Street as today's Victoria Street, and a very busy street it was. That's because in the early days of York (Toronto's original name), Yonge Street did not extend south of Lot Street (now Queen) due to the presence of a marshy swamp. Back then the small community's "downtown" was along King Street east and west of Church Street. To get there pedestrians as well as animal-drawn wagons and carts from the north and northwest would have to detour around the marsh and continue the trip via a thoroughfare called Toronto Street that connected Lot with King.

When it was decided to fill in the marsh and extend Yonge Street south of Queen, the original Toronto Street was closed and that land given to those who owned property through which the new lengthened Yonge Street now ran. By the way, it should be noted that back then opening and closing roads was no big deal since in most cases these so-called "roads" were usually no more than dirt paths.





Looking north on Toronto Street from the same vantage point on King Street in 1914 and in 2002.

Some years later a new street was opened east of Victoria that connected King with Adelaide. To identify it an old street name was resurrected. It became today's Toronto Street. Several grand buildings were erected on the new street only a couple of which still exist. They can be seen in the accompanying photos taken from the same vantage point and separated in time by more than 90 years.

To the extreme left is the Seventh Toronto Post Office (1851–53), a Greek temple-like structure now occupied by the Argus Corporation. Still on the left and at the top of the street is the Excelsior Life Building erected in 1914–15 and designed by “Old” City Hall architect E.J. Lennox. Opposite and barely visible in the modern photo, is the Consumers' Gas Building (erected 1876, with an 1890 addition).

At the top of the street in the old photo is the Eighth Toronto Post Office of 1876. It was sacrificed in 1960 for the modern office building that looms in the background of the 2002 view. For transportation buffs, the old view features a horse and wagon, a couple of bicycles, and a half-dozen or so of the new-fangled gas buggies.

January 5, 200

Bridging the Western Gap

So there I was reading one of Toronto's newspapers when I came across another of those articles concerning the building of a bridge from the foot of Bathurst Street over the Western Gap to Toronto Island. This one had some interesting comments that I thought the reader would find of interest.

While on a recent tour around the harbour, the chairman of the Toronto Harbour Commission stated that the work of constructing a bridge connecting the city and the Island at the foot of Bathurst Street should be started at once.

"How would you finance it?" he was asked.

"I believe that the Dominion and Provincial governments, the city and the Harbour Commission should contribute to construction," he replied.

"And what about the objections raised by the Island residents that it would mean cars over there?"

"I have only this to say, that the Island is for all the citizens, and not for a few."

With the Island bridge very much in the news these days, one might conclude that this article appeared in a recent edition of the newspaper. However, eagle-eyed readers will no doubt have noticed references to the "Toronto Harbour Commission" and the use of the expression "Dominion government" in the article. The former vanished in 1999 with the creation of the new Toronto Port Authority, and the infrequent use of the word *Dominion* these days provides clues that the news item as quoted is an old one. But how old you may ask?

It actually appeared in the *Telegram* on April 1, 1924! And mercy me, they're still haggling over the project.

Actually the idea of connecting the Island to the mainland is much older than that. In fact, we find that building such a bridge was one of the conditions attached to allowing streetcars to operate on Sundays in Toronto.

In this day of wide-open Sundays it's difficult to believe that at one time in Toronto's past the operation of public transit vehicles of any kind on Sunday was illegal, and those who tried to do so could and would be fined and/or put in jail. And with the adoption of the Lord's Day Act in the early 1900s other things that we now take for granted (buying bread, participating in sports, going to the movies) were also defined as being against the law.



This streetcar is typical of the kind that would have been used on the proposed Toronto Island route over the Western Gap. The sides were removed during the warmer months, resulting in these vehicles being known as “convertible cars.” This particular vehicle, seen here at the Dovercourt and Van Horne (now Dupont) intersection in 1904, was built 10 years earlier and scrapped in 1925.

In the case of Sunday streetcars, arguments were made both pro and con for their operation with a series of referendum votes being called to settle the question. The votes in 1892 and again in 1893 saw the use of the cars on the Sabbath defeated, while that of 1897 resulted in the operation of Sunday streetcars approved by a margin of slightly more than 200 out of a total of 32,324 cast. It was close, but Torontonians were now able to go to church on a streetcar.

Part of the scheme put forward by the privately owned streetcar company to influence the approval of the lucrative Sunday streetcar operations was its agreement to establish a new streetcar route to the Island. This line, which would be part of the city system accessible from any other city route using transfer, would permit the less-affluent Toronto population a day on the Island without the necessity of paying the extra 10-cent fare to cross the bay on a privately owned ferry boat.

The street railway company, while appearing to be on the side of the general public, knew there was little likelihood of ever having to build this line since the cost of erecting a bridge over the Western Gap on which the tracks would be laid as well as the access road from Bathurst and King streets were the sole responsibilities of the city. It was a well-known fact that the cash-strapped young city didn't have an extra \$104,720 lying around for something as frivolous as a bridge to the Island.

By the way, today's estimated cost of building an Island bridge, now referred to as a “fixed link” has increased somewhat and is now estimated at many millions of dollars.

January 12, 2000

Transporting Toronto

Located just north of the city's busy waterfront and steps from the CN Tower and SkyDome is the ancient CP Roundhouse. Where Canadian Pacific Railway's mighty steam engines were once serviced, the folks at Steam Whistle Brewery now turn out a tasty Pilsner.

While it's good to see somebody occupying what was just another abandoned historic building, a brewery certainly wasn't what many of us hoped would be the fate of the old structure that was constructed in 1929 on the site of Canadian Pacific's first Toronto roundhouse.

Steam engines continued to be serviced in this unique building for more than half a century with the huge doors closing for good in 1986. After the building's closure, I remember attending a meeting after a meeting during which a multitude of interested and well-meaning people discussed a whole bunch of ideas that might bring the old building back to life. Some believed that an operating steam railway museum would be the perfect re-use while others, myself included, thought that it would be a great place to tell the much broader story of Canada's fascinating transportation history.

Our plan would include, but not be limited to, just the era of steam. Showing the world what Canadians have done on land and sea and in the air would, we believed, do more to maximize visitations and increase income.



Souvenir postcard of the Toronto-built passenger steamer SS *Kingston*. Note the biplane overhead.

But those discussions ultimately went for naught when in the late spring of 2000 Steam Whistle began brewing operations in the roundhouse. Since that time any ideas to use the rest of the building for museum purposes seem to have been deleted from the old building's future role in Toronto.

That's unfortunate because there's quite a story to tell. Any plan to tell the country's transportation story in a roundhouse setting certainly wouldn't lack for content. In fact, you could use

all of the building's massive interior space just to tell the story of Toronto's contributions to the fabulous story.

For instance, here are just two events that took place in Toronto on January 19, the day I originally wrote this column, that prove my point.

It was on a cold January 19, 1901, that one of the finest passenger lake boats ever seen on the Great Lakes was launched in Toronto. And on that same date, a mere 49 years later, the first all-Canadian fighter jet designed and built in this country took to the skies out at the Avro Canada plant northwest of Toronto.

There is no question that January 19 was, and remains, a special day in the history of transportation in Ontario's capital.

The steamer *Kingston* was built for the Richelieu and Ontario Navigation Company (R&O) by the Bertram Engineering Works whose shipyard was located at the foot of Bathurst Street. The factory where parts of the great ship were fabricated is now occupied, in part, by the exotic car dealership at the northeast corner of Front and Bathurst. The finished components were transported across the railway tracks, down to the waterfront where they would be fitted together in time to create a fine new passenger ship, the 290-foot-long SS *Kingston*, which was powered by an inclined, three-crank, triple-expansion steam engine that ran a pair of 23-foot-diameter side paddlewheels. *Kingston* operated on the Toronto–Thousand Islands–Prescott run. At that last port most passengers would transfer to other ships for the thrilling ride through the Lachine Rapids and onwards to Montreal.

However, following the tragic and deadly fire of September 17, 1949, that destroyed SS *Noron* while at its berth in Toronto, Canada Steamship Lines (the successor to the R&O) decided to end all passenger ship service. The once-proud *Kingston* was retired from service and eventually scrapped.

Interestingly, even while this Toronto-built vessel awaited its fate, another creation from the hands of a new generation of local craftsman was about to make Canadian aviation history. With the world immersed in the uncertainties of the Cold War, the Royal Canadian Air Force was searching for a new aircraft to replace its outdated collection of piston-engine Mustangs and Sea Furies and pioneering Vampire jets. What was needed was an all-purpose, all-weather, twin-engine jet fighter.



Avro Canada's second CF-100, FB-K, designed and built at the company's suburban Toronto factory.

Officials looked at a number of jets designed and built by Americans, but decided our people could do as well or even better. This decision, one that was derided at the time by several so-called experts, would result in Avro Canada's remarkable CF-100, the first of which flew January 19, 1950.

In total, 692 CF-100s were built at the Malton, Ontario, factory. Interestingly, even after 30 years had passed since that first flight, several of the aircraft were still active as electronic warfare trainers. One CF-100 has even been honoured in the form of a permanent monument in a park-like setting on Derry Road East (near Goreway Drive), just a short distance from its birthplace.

To learn more about this Canadian aviation success story (and one that could have been a featured attraction in Canada's transportation story in the CP Roundhouse) read *The Avro CF-100* by Larry Milberry from CANAV Books.

January 19, 200

* After the sale of SkyDome to Rogers Communications in early 2005, the name of the stadium was quickly changed to Rogers Centre.

Bright, Shiny, and New

Almost without exception this column features an “ancient” photograph more often than not taken by some anonymous photographer. To be sure, where the identity of the person who took the picture is known the work is credited. Unfortunately, the passage of time since the photo was snapped usually precludes that possibility.

The matter of photo credits aside, in almost every instance where there are buildings in the original photograph, the vast majority of those structures has been demolished as a result of Toronto’s rush to replace what many regarded as passé, with things bright, shiny, and new.

One conclusion that might be drawn from all of this is that any photo containing an image of a building that no longer stands must have been taken by an old (or deceased) photographer. With this in mind you can imagine my consternation as I went through a bunch of photographs that I personally took since acquiring my interest in old Toronto some years ago. Many of those views showed buildings that are no more. Can it be that my stuff is also “ancient”? Is it possible that I am getting old? Or am I just older?

While I sit back and ponder my future I offer for your perusal a quartet of my “ancient” photos.

January 26, 2000



The University Theatre stood on the north side of Bloor Street between Bellair Street and Avenue Road. This was one of the first major motion picture palaces to be erected following the end of the Second World War in 1945. The 1,556-seat theatre’s official opening was postponed several times owing to the shortage of structural steel that had been diverted for use in the construction of electrical generating stations around the province. This same shortage resulted in the delayed opening of the Toronto-Barrie highway (now 400) and the Toronto Bypass Highway (now 401). The University finally opened in 1949 and was one of the city’s most popular movie houses until its closure in 1986. At that time there were plans to incorporate a portion of the theatre as well as to

theatre facade in the new development planned for the site. Unfortunately, the curtain never went up on this interesting proposal. The marquee reveals that the feature presentation at the theatre when I took this picture in 1979 was *Apocalypse Now*.



When I was a kid, this imposing structure was usually referred to rather disparagingly as “999 Queen Street.” Built between 1846 and 1858, the Provincial Lunatic Asylum was regarded as one of the most modern treatment facilities for the mentally ill anywhere in the world. Unfortunately, the stigma of what went on inside the asylum precluded the building having any future. And while pleas were made to at least save certain architecturally significant portions of the complex (the massive dome, for instance), the whole thing came crashing down in 1975. The Queen Street Mental Health Centre now occupies the site.



While on the subject of unimposing buildings (actually this structure still stands or was standing when I wrote this article), the building at the southeast corner of Dupont Street and Westmoreland Avenue is where Torontonians Norman Breakey perfected his Koton Koter in the early 1940s. Where he perfected his what? Norman Breakey was the inventor of the paint roller that Eaton's and Simpson's sold under the name Koton Koter for \$1.98. Following a typically Canadian scenario, Norman wasn't able to raise sufficient funds to protect his invention and soon variations of his creation had flooded the market, leaving poor Mr. Breakey a might-have-been millionaire.



Constructed in the early 1900s to house the “Northern” branch of the Traders’ Bank of Canada, this imposing building on the northeast corner of Yonge and Bloor became a branch of the Royal Bank when the latter took over the former in 1912. It was demolished to clear the way for the unimposing Hudson’s Bay Centre that opened in 1974.

An Elegant Liquor Store

Located on the east side of Yonge Street, halfway between Davenport Road and St. Clair Avenue, is the former CPR North Toronto Station. Once regarded as a component of the city's fast-growing passenger steam railroad network, the building saw its importance as a transportation hub vanish soon after the opening of Toronto's new Union Station downtown on Front Street West.

Deprived of its passengers, the once-proud structure with its landmark clock tower was eventually converted to other uses. Perhaps it was its newfound popularity as a combination beer and liquor store that precluded any chance of its demolition, an irreversible fate that many of the building's contemporaries had met. Whatever the reason, the station survived and re-opened in February 2003 as the site of Canada's largest (and might I add most elegant) liquor store.

Interestingly, the reason that the CPR opened the new North Toronto Station in 1916 was actually nothing more than an act of defiance. The company, as well as the nation's other two transcontinental railways, the Canadian Northern and Grand Trunk, had been ordered by the federal government to construct and help pay for a modern new railway station to replace the city's outdated 1872 Union Station that was located on the south side of Front opposite today's University Avenue. In addition to the cost of the new station the railways were also expected to help pay for a new viaduct and the associated bridges and underpasses that would be required to allow the trains unobstructed access to and from the station.

The estimated cost of the project was \$28.5 million, and officials of the CPR eventually decided they wanted no part of it. They would build their own station instead. And it would be far uptown adjacent to the company's cross-town main line.



It's summer 1916, and the CPR's new North Toronto Station awaits its first visitors. The tower clock tells us it's 10:00 a.m.

This decision having been made the company then hired the prestigious Toronto architectural firm of Darling and Pearson to design the new station. The first set of drawings was altered when it was decided that the Canadian Northern would use the same facility. Finally, on September 9, 1916, Toronto's popular mayor Tommy Church tapped the station's cornerstone into place.

The mayor was back a little more than nine months later to officially open the new \$250,000 station. Within weeks of the opening approximately 10 trains a day were calling at the new CP North Toronto Station.



Still a stately building, even though the clock has long since vanished, the station awaits its future in this photo I took more than a decade ago.

The Canadian Northern wouldn't use the station very long, though. It, along with several other financially embarrassed railways including the Grand Trunk, were taken over by the federal government and combined into the new Canadian National Railways.

Before long the new North Toronto Station was overcrowded, but the company still refused to give up the parcel involved in the new waterfront station. Rumours started to circulate that the CPR had acquired a large parcel of land close to where Maple Leaf Gardens now stands on Carlton Street, just east of Yonge

The rumours suggested that it would be here that CPR would build a mammoth new underground railway terminal of its own complete with a huge hotel soaring high above the proposed station. A 100-foot-wide tunnel would be built through the terminal, and trains would be brought to the proposed new downtown terminal from the main line at the existing North Toronto Station. Of course, it was all rumours.

Eventually, CPR officials thought better of their decision not to be part of the majestic new Union Station on Front Street, and by late 1929 CPR trains were operating out of the new facility. Meanwhile, the North Toronto Station, now devoid of any railway traffic, soon took on a new role as the site of beer and liquor outlets.

The building has suffered over the past few decades, but now with its facade and interior all nicely cleaned up and its 140-foot-high tower featuring a clock once more, the CPR North Toronto Station is a shining example of what can be done with our city landmarks if someone cares.

February 2, 2000

Car Show on the Road Again

The Canadian International Car Show is one of Canada's most popular consumer exhibitions. It usually takes place at the Toronto Convention Centre on Front Street West, where at least 300,000 visitors are wowed, dazzled, and amazed by the hundreds of cars, trucks, and specialty vehicles on display.

Newspaper records seem to be unanimous in the conclusion that the first gasoline-powered "horseless carriages" seen on Toronto's frequently dusty, often muddy streets were those driven by anonymous American visitors who crossed the rather porous border on exploration trips into what many of them still referred to simply as British North America.

Incidentally, the term *gasoline-powered* is important in this story since once the visitors got here they would probably have seen a local patent attorney, one Frederick Fetherstonhaugh, roaming the city streets in a "battery-powered" machine built for him in the small Yonge Street factory of inventor William Still. By the way, that vehicle, the battery of which was recharged using power from the overhead of the Toronto and York Radial Railway that ran in front of Mr. Fetherstonhaugh's place on Lake Shore Road near today's Royal York Road, was still in service more than a decade later.

As for the first Canadian to own a gas-powered auto, there's little doubt that the honour belongs to Hamilton, Ontario's John Moodie. He purchased an American-built one-cylinder Winton on April 1, 1898, from none other than Alexander Winton, the company president who travelled to the Steel City from his Cleveland plant to conclude the deal in person. It's been suggested that had Moodie made his acquisition one day sooner he would have been the purchaser of the first gas-powered car on the continent.



An awesome array of new vehicles awaits the crowds that will visit the 1929 edition of the National Motor Show of Canada held on the two floors of Simpson's Arcadian Court in downtown Toronto.

Nevertheless, Moodie's new car had cost him \$1,000, but as usual there was still the duty to be paid. The customs people classified the strange vehicle as a "carriage" on which the duty was 3 percent. Moodie insisted that the car should be regarded as a "locomotive." Moodie eventually won his case (the last in history to do so) thereby saving himself 100 bucks. Moodie didn't keep the car very long, selling it to Torontonian Dr. Perry Doolittle, who then claimed the distinction of being the purchaser of Canada's first used car.

Doolittle, who is buried in Toronto's Mount Pleasant Cemetery, is an interesting person in his own right. He became a major player in the development of both cars and highways throughout the Dominion and was one of the founders of what we know today as the Canadian Automobile Association. He was also the first person (with friend Edward Flickenger) to drive a vehicle (a 1902 Model T Ford) from coast to coast under its own power, although for part of the trip flanged steel wheels replaced the car's rubber tires to allow the vehicle to travel over railway tracks through otherwise inaccessible areas.

As the years went by, an ever-increasing number of vehicles from a wide variety of manufacturers began to appear on city streets, and it wasn't long before impromptu "car shows" erupted on the side of the road as curious crowds gathered around the latest models. Every so often, local automobile dealers filled their showrooms with different models they had the rights to sell and then advertised the event as a "car show." However, the first time that an "all-models" event was held, not just in Toronto but anywhere in the entire country, occurred on March 31, 1906, when the Canadian Automobile and Boat Show opened in the covered rink in the rear of the old Granite Club on Church Street (a portion of which still stands as 519 Church Street).

Other Toronto venues for automobile shows over the ensuing years were the Armouries on University Avenue (now the site of the Court House) and the Transportation (destroyed by fire in 1974) and Horticultural (still standing) buildings at the Canadian National Exhibition. So important were these shows that in 1929 a building dedicated specifically to cars and trucks was built at the east end of the CNE grounds. It was here that the newest models were first seen by the Canadian public attending the fall fair. Unfortunately, when the CNE decided to move its show dates from early September to late August, the only vehicles available for display were the previous year's models. As this was of little use to the dealers or of interest to the public, the last of the once extremely popular CNE car shows was held in 1967.

One of the most unusual venues ever selected for a car show in Toronto was the one chosen for the February 1929 edition of the National Motor Show of Canada. Its exhibition hall was none other than Simpson's magnificent two-storey Arcadian Court on the eighth and ninth floors of the store's recently completed Bay Street addition. To get the cars into place, they had to be hoisted up the Richmond Street side of the building and hauled in through the windows. No doubt quite a sight. After the car show, the Arcadian Court would be advertised as the largest restaurant in a department store anywhere in the world.

February 9, 2000

Attitude Adjustment

It's funny how our values change with the passage of time. Attitudes towards the preservation of historic structures are a case in point. I can recall that during the initial discussions back in 1965 about something called the Eaton Centre many people believed that this futuristic \$260-million project was just too important to Toronto, and to the future of its downtown, to allow anything, anything, to jeopardize its completion. And since the original version of the Centre was to occupy the entire Queen, Bay, Dundas, Yonge parcel of land, the demolition of virtually every building standing on that property was pretty much a foregone conclusion regardless of any historic significance any of those structures might have had.

For sure, all the shops on the west side of Yonge from Dundas to Queen would go except for the old Woolworth store at the Yonge and Queen corner. That wasn't because of any specific historical significance. No, it was because the site was owned by McMaster University as a result of an ancient will drawn up by a member of the Bilton family who didn't like Timothy Eaton very much. As a result, the site was off-limits to anyone connected with the Eatons. I wonder if that will still be in force.

The future of several other buildings in what was being referred to as the "superblock," including the Salvation Army headquarters, the historic 1847 Holy Trinity Anglican Church, and a couple of the church's neighbouring buildings, also appeared to be in jeopardy. But there was one structure on the site that many Torontonians regarded as untouchable. That was Toronto's "Old" City Hall, a building that had stood at the northeast corner of Queen and Bay since 1899 (although back then the stretch of Bay north of Queen was still called Terauley).

"Old" City Hall was once regarded as one of the finest municipal buildings on the continent, and the decision by City Council not to turn it over to the developers was one of the main reasons for the failure of that first Eaton Centre proposal. In fact, recognizing how important the old building was to the outcome of the discussions, the developers even went as far as to suggest they would keep the 30-foot-high clock tower and the Cenotaph as gestures of goodwill. But, nope, it was the preservation of the entire building or the deal was off. Sentiment and fiscal conflicts won the day, and on May 1, 1967, Eaton Centre Number 1 was officially declared dead.

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